

Malcolm Saville

Man with Three Fingers



A LONE PINE
ADVENTURE

Contents

[Foreword](#)

[The Lone Pine Club](#)

[1. Monday: The Lorry](#)

[2. Tuesday: Witchend](#)

[3. Wednesday: The Green Necklace](#)

[4. Wednesday: "Mister" Cantor](#)

[5. Thursday: Three Black Crows](#)

[6. Thursday: Amanda's Story](#)

[7. Friday: The Man With Three Fingers](#)

[8. Friday: Search the Scriptures](#)

[9. Friday: Jenny and Tom](#)

[10. Friday Evening: Jenny Grows Up](#)

[11. Friday Night: Dank Discovered](#)

[12. Saturday: The Sign of the Hawk](#)

[13. Saturday Night: Camp-fire](#)

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Malcolm Saville

Armada

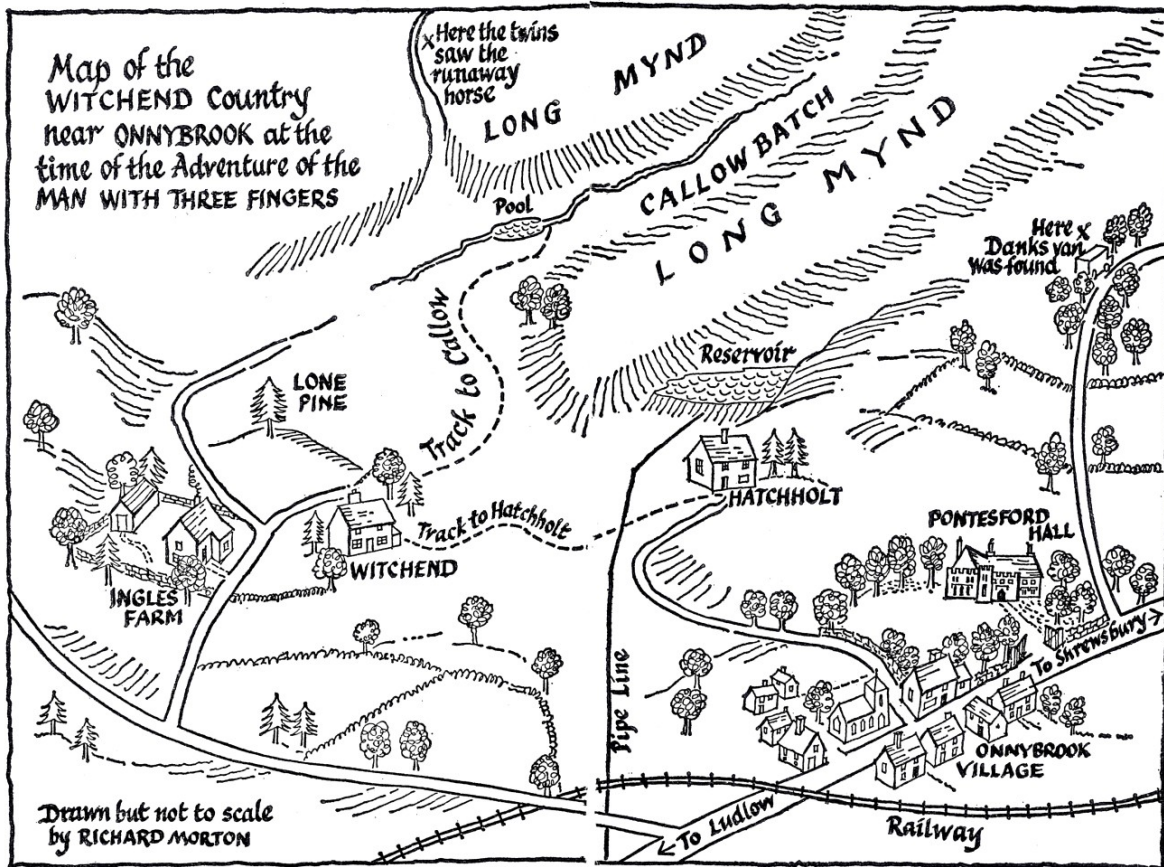
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Foreword

Even if you have never read any of the adventures of the boys and girls who founded the Lone Pine Club, and who are known now in many parts of the world as the Lone Piners, you will find this story complete in itself.

The country in which this story is set is real, and you can go yourself to the Long Mynd, which is a long plateau 1600 feet high not very far from the borders of Wales. The best place from which to explore the Mynd is Church Stretton, which you can find on a map on the road between Ludlow and Shrewsbury. Both these are wonderful old towns, but you must understand that the depot from which the big lorries start for the midlands and the south is not real. There is no such place. I mention the police station in Shrewsbury, but the one I describe is imaginary, as are the detectives and the policeman. There is no village called Onnybrook, no Pontesford Hall so far as I know, and if there is, it is not the place I describe. You will never find Witchend, I am afraid, nor Peter's Hatchholt, but if you are a good walker and go to one of the Strettons it would not be long before you have discovered some of the lonely, winding valleys that cut into the eastern escarpment of the Mynd like gutters - and that indeed is what they are called locally. Perhaps one day you will discover a little house tucked against the hillside with a lonely pine tree not far away. Perhaps you will find a reservoir gleaming like dark glass in a secret valley. If you do you must try to imagine the fair-headed Peter riding her Welsh pony Sally along the track from Hatchholt to Witchend to meet her friends.

All the characters in the story and in every story I write are imaginary. The Lone Piners have had adventures for over twenty years, and although most readers do not want them to grow up, they must forgive me when they find them now behaving as if they were living and taking part in adventures in the 1970's. It seems now that the older ones - David and Peter, and particularly Tom and Jenny whose story this is - must not only be old enough to realize how much they mean to each other but old enough to behave with courage, common sense and integrity. You will see why when you read this story - the adventure is not the usual sort of exploit in which younger boys and girls could become involved.

I think, therefore, that for this story we must imagine that Peter is nearly seventeen and David about six months older. Tom, still working on his uncle's farm, is nearly eighteen, and Jenny, who really grows up in this book, is about a year younger than Tom. The Lone Piners have so often come to the rescue and helped to right a wrong, but this is the toughest job they have taken on for a long time.

I hope you will enjoy it.

M.S.

The Lone Pine Club

The Lone Pine Club was founded as a secret society at a lonely house called Witchend in a hidden valley of the Long Mynd in Shropshire. The first headquarters of the Club was in a clearing marked by a solitary pine tree, on the slopes of this valley. The original rules of the Club are very simple and are set out in full in *Mystery at Witchend*, which is the first story about the Lone Piners and was written over twenty years ago. Many readers have asked that the Lone Piners should not get any older from book to book, but others have felt that the characters should experience their adventures in the 1970's and you will find in this story some of them do.

There are now nine members of the Lone Pine Club, but it is not usual for them all to appear in one story. The following appear in this one:-

Jenny Harman: Almost 17, lives with her father and stepmother who keep the village store and post office in Barton Beach where Jenny was born. She is Tom's special friend.

Tom Ingles: Almost 18, born a Londoner but now lives with his uncle Alf Ingles and helps work his farm which is about half a mile from Witchend.

Petronella (Peter) Sterling: 17. Really the founder of the Lone Pine Club. She has just left school and is happiest riding over the Shropshire hills on Sally her Welsh pony. She lives with her father at Hatchholt where he is in charge of a reservoir. She now knows that one day she will marry David.

David Morton: Almost 18. Captain and co-founder of the Lone Pine Club. Has just left school and lives in London with his family.

Richard (Dickie) and Mary Morton: Ten-year-old twins.

Macbeth: The Mortons' Scottie dog, an honorary member of the Club.

The other members are:-

Jonathan Warrender who lives with his mother at her hotel, the Gay Dolphin, in Rye; *Penelope (Penny) Warrender*, Jonathan's cousin who also lives at the Gay Dolphin as her parents are abroad and *Harriet Sparrow*, a Londoner, who often spends her holidays with her grandfather in Yorkshire.

1. Monday: The Lorry

Tom Ingles was not in a particularly good humour as he pushed his bicycle out of the barn at his uncle's farm. It was hot and thundery and the heavy storm-clouds were massing over the ridge of the mountain behind him. He was used to the Long Mynd now and there was not much he did not know about its moods, its loneliness once the summer visitors had gone, and its secret places.

Tom, who had been born in London, was nearly eighteen now and it had taken him a long time to get used to life in Shropshire. His Uncle Alf and his aunt, who had no children, had been good to him. He did not mind the work although it was hard, but Ingles was a small farm and Onnybrook, the village down in the valley on the Shrewsbury-Ludlow road, was dull and nothing much ever happened there. True, there was Jenny Harman, the pretty little redhead over at Barton Beach, but he did not see much of her in term time and although he was very fond of her she was younger than he was and only just leaving school. And there was Petronella Sterling, living over at Hatchholt by the reservoir with her old father, but she was David Morton's girl and, come to think of it, always had been. David was all right of course, but he only came to Witchend, just up the lane, during the holidays because he lived in London. He was a good chap, but the truth was that Tom was the eldest of this lot and the only one working for a living, and if Ned Stacey had not come to live in a council house in Onnybrook with his mother, life round this dead-and-alive place would have been impossible. Ned was different. He was twenty and earning good money now driving lorries for the Swift and Sure Transport Company in Shrewsbury. He had telephoned this morning asking Tom to meet him at the Four Aces cafe in the town at twelve o'clock. Monday was Tom's half-day, but when his uncle refused to let him go off early he was annoyed and had to tell Ned that he would not be along until after dinner.

So Tom, from force of habit, closed the farmyard gate carefully behind him and rode down the lane to Onnybrook, where he left his bike in the yard of the Four Feathers as usual and went over to the bus stop. In a fortnight he would have saved enough to put down a good sum for a new motor-bike.

No second-hand job for him. It had been worth waiting to get a new one and Ned had advised him well. Ned had been riding a real bike for years, of course, and one of Tom's troubles up at Ingles was that his aunt was always fussing over him and did not want him to have a motor-bike and tried to put him off. Anyway, only two more Fridays and then, "Good-bye bus queues."

"Hello, young Tom," said a large woman with a shopping bag as he came up. "You're looking smart. How's Jenny Harman? Coming over to Hatchholt to stay with Peter Sterling, I hear, while your friends the Mortons are at Witchend. Coming tomorrow, aren't they? They're a good crowd and there's many round here pleased to see them. You'll be glad to see Jenny, I'll be bound. She's going to be a real beauty is Jenny and I daresay you'll be seeing quite a lot of each other..."

She paused for breath and then luckily the bus arrived. Tom knew that what she said was true and that most of the members of the kids' secret society (called the Lone Pine Club because their first camp was under a solitary pine tree above Witchend), were assembling tomorrow. He also knew that Jenny was not only a pretty girl who seemed to be growing up fast, but that she was much nicer to him than he was to her.

As the bus started he ran up the steps to the top deck and settled down in the corner of the front seat and began to feel drowsy. The thunder rolled, the first heavy drops of rain banged like spent bullets on the roof of the bus and then a flash of lightning tore across the darkening sky.

Tom looked down and saw a man he did not know struggling to fix a poster to a board at the entrance gates of Pontesford Hall. This reminded Tom that his uncle had told him some weeks ago that a very decent retired man and his wife had bought the old Hall and were having a lot of alterations made. His aunt had also remarked that this couple were already winning the approval of the village by their general behaviour and kindness. Everybody knew that it was lucky a buyer had been found after the death of the eccentric Miss Pontesford, because the building and the land might have been sold for development. Onnybrook was not the sort of village that wanted to get larger. With the new housing estate full of strangers it was already too big, and really the only thing they wanted was a better bus service.

Then his eyes closed and he sank into a blissful state of not caring where he was and not doing anything except think about the sort of things he rarely had time to do when he was working on the farm. He realized that his new friendship with Ned Stacey was very different from his longer companionship with the Lone Piners and particularly with Jenny. Ned was adult. He was smart. He knew how to get on and go places, as he had pointed out to Tom more than once. He had ideas too. New ideas. "With it" ideas. He was not a square like Uncle Alf Ingles, who was so square that he was practically a cube.

The Mortons and Peter did not know about Ned yet and there was no particular reason why they should. Tom knew that while they would all certainly try to like Ned for his sake, Ned would consider them as kids and not worth his notice. The twins, Dickie and Mary Morton, would be beyond his comprehension and he could not imagine that Peter would like him, although, as she was as pretty as Jenny in a different way and certainly more mature, Ned might look a second time at her. Then, a few weeks ago when Jenny had asked him to cycle over and see her at Barton Beach, he had told her that he could not come because he had arranged to go out with Ned on the back of his motor-bike and this had not pleased her.

And so it seemed as if the next few weeks would be rather difficult because it was not going to be funny telling Jenny that he really had got to have some older friends. Tom hoped that he would find the courage to do it and then, suddenly, although his eyes were closed he seemed to see her looking at him with a hurt look in her wide grey eyes. Jenny was a chatterbox, and the others all teased her because she read romantic novels. But, deep down, Tom knew that he would never find a more loyal friend and without being conceited he realized that he was more important to her than she was to him. She always looked such a kid because she only reached to his shoulder. He knew she was not really happy at home because she did not get on with her stepmother, and that did not surprise Tom, who did not like her either. Mr. Harman, who kept the little village store and post office at Barton, was all right, but it was difficult to know whether he showed Jenny much affection. She rarely spoke about him.

If Tom had been asked to describe Jenny he would have found her difficult to put into words. Pretty, with vivid red hair which waved naturally, a small, well-shaped, faintly freckled face and a very attractive snub nose. Small, neat and lively and never a mean word about anybody and always generous and warm-hearted. True, she also had a redhead's quick temper, but she was as quick to forgive as she was to accuse, and Tom, as he thought about her now, was aware that he did not really do as much as he might to please her.

He sat up and opened his eyes as another peal of thunder crashed overhead and realized that the bus was already in the outskirts of Shrewsbury. It was always a treat for Tom to come here. Lots of the little old-fashioned shops had been knocked down and big new stores had grown up in their place. There was plenty to do in Shrewsbury and plenty of cafe's like the Four Aces where he was going to meet Ned.

As the bus lumbered over the English Bridge he looked down on the brown, swirling Severn which was already swollen with the rains of the summer thunderstorms that had been rumbling over the Welsh hills for the last few days.

Tom went straight to the Four Aces, hoping that Ned would still be there, as the time was now a quarter past three. The windows of the cafe were steamed up and when he opened the door he was met by a blast of hot, smoky air and the din of pop music from a juke box in the corner. A lad he knew by sight shouted "Hi there" out of the side of his mouth and the girl with him looked Tom up and down and then smiled at him. Then he saw Ned sitting by himself at a table for two in the corner. He was smoking a cigarette and reading a paper.

Tom went over and sat down on the empty chair.

"Hello, Ned. Sorry I've been so long. Had to finish a job and then I had to feed. Week next Saturday I get the bike and then I'll be over here in twenty minutes. What's the news?"

Ned Stacey was tall and lean and rather fancied his looks. He wore a little moustache and his thick, black hair had not been cut for months and flowed over his collar at the back of his neck. He spent a lot of his money on

"modern" clothes, which secretly Tom thought were often rather silly, but which nevertheless made him a little envious.

Ned looked up as he stubbed out his cigarette. Tom noticed that he was wearing a large ring with the letter "N" emblazoned in gold on some sort of black stone as wide as his finger.

"You're late, Tommyboy, but I reckon you always will be until you get away from Ingles. You're nothing but a slave and I can't think why you're wasting your time in that hole. I'd have cleared out from here long ago if I hadn't got some special news for you. I've had a stroke of luck. Real lucky break... Have a coffee with me and I'll tell you about it... O.K., Tommyboy. Just stay where you are and I'll do the honours."

So Tom stayed put and wondered if the din from the juke box would ever stop. When Ned came back from the bar with two coffees he offered Tom a cigarette.

"You know I don't smoke, Ned. I don't like it and, anyway, I can taste it just by taking a few deep breaths in here. What's your good news?"

"It's great news, Tommyboy. They're going to give me a big chance. Mr. Dank - he's the manager up at the Swift and Sure - is a good bloke. We get on O.K. and he's looked after me. Mind you, Tom, I like this job. I like engines. Suits me on the road. Better than a job in a factory, better than being stuck out at Onnybrook like you and not much cash at the end of the week to show for it. You're on your own when you're up in the driving seat, see? You've got to make the decisions when you're driving - specially at night. And the other chaps you meet up with at the transport cafes are a good lot. You ought to come in on this game, Tom. You'll have your bike soon and I'd soon fix it for you to learn to drive a car. It's a good life, Tom. Manchester, Glasgow, Brum and down south to London. You're the sort of chap who'd make a good driver, Tom."

Tom thought so too. He was keen to drive. He was sick of being stuck on the farm and he liked Ned. Admired him, too, for the way he had got on since he had first met him about six months ago driving a lorry round the farms and picking up milk churns.

"Let's talk about what I'll do later," he said. "What's the big news? What's your boss done to please you? Got a rise?"

"I'll be getting a bonus though, Tom. The driver booked to take a valuable load to London tonight has gone sick and Dank has given me the chance. He says he's pleased with me and I've got to start long night trips soon. I'm going, of course, and this is my big idea for you. I want you to come along with me in the cab some of the way and then I'll get you a lift back here with one of the blokes going north. I can fix that easy. I know a transport drivers' place called Dick's Cafe where all the chaps driving north stop for a break. I want you to come along with me to see what it's like and I'd like your company too. You can telephone Ingles and say you're with me and I'm putting you up in my room for the night. You can get on the first bus in the morning to Onnybrook easy enough. You'll come along, won't you?"

Tom barely hesitated. He knew that if he stopped to consider he would think of fifty reasons why he should not. This was a chance to do something exciting and different. He was not yet completely sure that he wanted to be a lorry driver, but he was convinced that sooner or later he had got to make an effort to show some independence. His uncle and aunt must realize that he was no longer a kid. He was doing a man's work and they must treat him like one.

"O.K., Ned. I'll come along, but I shall tell my uncle the truth. There's no sense in making up a story, and if you'll not let me down and make sure I'll get back here in time for the first bus I'll phone them presently... Where are we going now and what time do you start tonight?"

Ned seemed pleased that Tom was coming. For all his smart clothes and talk, what he had told Tom was the truth. He really did enjoy driving and he liked the job. He liked showing off, too, and there was much that he admired about Tom, although he would have found his feelings difficult to put into words. He was not lazy and he really was ambitious, but because he had no father and his mother had always spoiled him he was extremely selfish. He had expected Tom to say "No" because he did not dare to spend a night away from the farm, and one of the reasons he had asked him was that he would be glad of his company in the driving cabin. Tonight's job was a big responsibility.

"O.K., Tom. Let's get out of here then. I've got to go back to the depot and I'm due out at nine. You'd better ring up now and fix everything and then you could go to the flicks. I'll pick you up about five past nine the other side of the English Bridge - better if you don't come to the depot."

It was raining again when they went out into the street and Tom realized that he had plenty of time to spare. For a moment or two he wondered whether he really wanted to go, but he had given his word now and remembered that this was his first big chance to show his independence. And if he was going to telephone he had better get it over, because it was at this time that his uncle usually came in for his tea.

Alfred Ingles was a good-natured man who liked the sound of his own voice and rarely gave anyone else a chance to speak. And he shouted. Not because either he or his listeners were deaf but because he was that sort of man, and Tom knew from experience that he would have to hold the receiver about a foot away from his ear when he was in the call-box.

It needed plenty of courage to tell his uncle that he was not coming home tonight, but he managed to start without being interrupted or deafened. Obviously Mr. Ingles was almost stunned and speechless with surprise.

"...It's all fixed up O.K., Uncle. Ned has got his big chance and I'm going to keep him company and come back with one of Ned's pals and catch the first bus out of Shrewsbury in the morning."

For a few seconds there was a terrifying silence and then, to Tom's amazement, his uncle said in a hoarse whisper:

"You don't really mean what you're saying, do you, Tom? I'm not having this, and your Aunt Betty will be real upset. You don't know what you're doing and young Ned Stacey has got no right to ask you. It's crazy-----" And then his voice rose to the more familiar roar and Tom hurriedly held the receiver at a safe distance, "YOU'RE CRAZY, BOY. IT'S NOT SAFE, YOU COME RIGHT HOME HERE AT TEN O'CLOCK OR I'LL COME AND FETCH YOU!"

Tom found that he was shaking with the tension of this awful scene. It was just possible that he would have given way if his uncle had not been silly enough to tell him what time he ought to be in. The fact that he mentioned ten o'clock brought all Tom's courage back.

"I'm sorry, Uncle," he said. "I'm going with Ned and I'll be back in the morning, like I said. Tell Aunt Betty not to fuss. I'm O.K. and you may as well get used to remembering that Ned Stacey is my pal. Cheerio!" and he rang off and came out of the phone box mopping the perspiration from his face.

Ned seemed surprised but pleased that Tom had fixed this and congratulated him. Then he went on:

"Sorry I must go now, but old Dank is going to brief me and there's a lot of things to check up... There's a pub called The Old Tree a little way down the Wellington Road. It's got a big car park in front and I'll pick you up there just after nine. Behave yourself till then, Tommyboy. See you presently."

Although the rain had stopped now, Tom decided that the best thing to do was to go to the cinema, and that was the first time for an hour that he remembered Jenny. In spite of the night's adventure before him he wished she was here. Jenny loved the flicks.

Funny little Jen, he thought, as he strolled down the crowded street, and he was still thinking of her when suddenly he saw in a shop window a necklace of green beads. He knew that Jenny liked green. "It's my colour, Tom," she had said once. He went in and bought the necklace from a very superior girl and tried not to look surprised when she told him the price.

Then he went to the cinema and was bored. When he came out nearly three hours later it was raining again and looked like being a dirty night. He went into a cafe, had two eggs and chips and a cup of tea and wondered whether it was raining over the Long Mynd and whether, after all, it might not be more sensible to go home. Maybe Ned would not turn up or his boss would change the plan, and he would look a fine fool going back to Onnybrook on the last bus and waking his uncle to let him in.

Tom paid his bill and went out into the rain again. Ten to nine, so if he was going to keep his promise he must go at once. It was nearly dark when he reached the car park of The Old Tree and saw a lorry in the shadows.

No chance to change his mind now if this was Ned. It was, and as Tom hurried across he slid back the window on his side and called to him.

"Nice work, Tommyboy. Jump in the other side and get cracking. I'm not supposed to hang about here and we've a long way to go."

As Tom hurried round the lorry he noticed that there was no lettering on the side and that the back was secured with a padlocked iron bar. He wondered what was inside. His first impression, when he had clambered up beside Ned, was that he was a long way from the road and very high up. The cabin was larger than he had expected and the seat surprisingly comfortable.

"Slam the door and keep the window shut," Ned said as he started the engine. "I've got some new instructions and we're not going down the M.1. Don't talk until we're out of the town and then maybe you can help me, because I'm taking a route I've only been once before... Dunno why Dank doesn't want me on the M.1 but maybe it's because it's my first long-distance solo at night and the weather is so dirty... We've got to go through Wellington and down to Towcester on A.5, but we'll be O.K."

Ned was a good driver and it was obvious that he enjoyed it. Tom was soon aware that the Ned with his hands on the huge wheel and whose eyes never left the road was a different Ned from the arrogant young man with the long hair who wasted his time in the Four Aces.

It was dark when they drove into Wellington. The rain slashed against the windscreen and the street-lights were reflected in the oily puddles. The engine throbbed sweetly and the great wheels beneath them hissed over the gleaming roadway. Small saloon cars looking almost like toys passed them easily on the right and were then caught up at traffic lights. When they were through the town Ned told him that he did not know what his load was, although he believed it to be cigarettes. His job was to drive just beyond St. Albans in Hertfordshire, where a new man would take over to drive the lorry into London.

"And what about me?" Tom asked. "You promised to get me back to Shrewsbury. How far have we to go before you get me a lift back again?"

"Not to worry, chum. I know a transport cafe near Stony Stratford. You'll get a lift back O.K. Just before Towcester, though, we've got to get off the main road for a bit and make a detour. Mr. Dank told me there's a lot of repair work going on and single-line traffic and that sort of lark. He's got it all fixed. We've got to turn left at a pub called The Harrow into a side road and cut off about six miles. He was fussy about this, so we'll watch out for that pub. He knows what he's doing. He's a good bloke."

Tom said nothing. He was enjoying himself and had forgotten about Ingles and the green beads in his pocket. Ned was right. This was a good life and a fine job to be in charge of a valuable cargo like this and to be trusted to deliver it safe and sound after driving through England in the night.

Ned was speaking again and must have read his thoughts.

"See what I mean about this job, don't you, Tommyboy? I'd like to get you in on this... But there are risks, mind you. Plenty of bandit types about ready to hijack loads like ours. See that knob on the floor between us? That's the alarm siren and either of us could reach it in a second if we were in trouble. Most long-distance chaps have that now and the coppers are always patrolling the big roads. Maybe Dank has heard of some trouble and wants to keep me clear of it tonight... Not to worry, though. It's stopped raining and I've got a feeling it's my lucky night."

But Ned was wrong. Half an hour later he warned Tom to be on the lookout for The Harrow and after a few minutes they saw it on the left of the road. It was closed, of course, because it was now nearly midnight and there was much less traffic about. A fitful moon occasionally broke through the scudding stormclouds, and as Ned slowed down to turn cautiously into the side road which was overshadowed by trees, Tom noticed a furniture van parked in the space in front of the pub.

"Looks an odd sort of way round to me," he said, as Ned switched on a powerful spotlight. "Did you tell your boss that you were giving me a lift tonight, Ned?"

"I wouldn't dare do that. Not allowed to give lifts. Never to stop and give a lift, anyway, and not really allowed to stop for an accident. Accidents have been faked before now."

Something in his voice suggested to Tom that Ned was nervous. The road was narrow, with high hedges and ditches on each side. There was no sign of a house or cottage and Ned had to drive with great caution. Suddenly Tom saw a light reflected in the wing mirror on his side. He turned to Ned, who said:

"O.K., Tommy. I've seen it. There's something big behind us and there's no room for him to pass. I'll let him go if the road widens, but I don't like this chap. He's keeping too close."

Tom's heart began to thud with excitement, but even though Ned was scared he still drove well. They turned a sharp corner and the road widened. Ned pulled over to the left and flashed his indicator for the vehicle behind to pass. As he did so, he slowed down and the driver behind switched on full headlights. Tom heard the roar of a powerful engine as the great van crowded up on them. It came so dangerously close that it hit them with a rasping noise and scraped along their side.

Ned wrenched at his wheel as the van passed them and then pulled across, blocking the road. A man in a black leather jacket, but with his face masked with a stocking pulled over it, came running back and flung open the door on Ned's side.

"Look what you've done to my van, you clumsy young fool," he shouted, and began to swear. Ned shouted back something that Tom could not catch because somebody was now battering at the locked doors at the back of their lorry. Their headlights were full on, and as Tom, in a panic, tried to find the knob of the alarm siren he realized that Ned was being dragged, struggling, out of the cabin by the first highwayman.

"Run for it, Tom!" Ned yelled, and then, to Tom's horror, he saw, in the fierce glare of their headlights, the man in the leather jacket hit Ned a glancing blow with a clenched fist and then, as the lad came back at him, the man raised in his right hand something that might have been an iron bar

or a heavy stick and struck his friend on the head so that he fell unconscious on the road.

Then Tom found the alarm signal. He pressed it and the night was filled with the din of a wailing siren which could surely be heard a mile away on a night as still as this. He moved his foot but the knob stayed down. He saw the big man cursing as he ran back to the lorry, but could not hear what he was saying. He distinctly saw him raise the weapon in his hand and ducked as it shattered the windscreen. Tom wrenched open his door, jumped out and stumbled into a shallow ditch. Another man grabbed at him and somehow Tom dodged him. He tried to turn so that he could run back down the road in the darkness, but had no chance because the first man was on him now. Again Tom saw the menacing upraised arm in the headlights, and the last sound he heard for many hours was the siren still howling its warning into the night.

2. Tuesday: Witchend

On the afternoon of the next day Petronella Sterling, called Peter by her friends, left her father dozing in the sunshine outside the door of their cottage and went out to saddle her Welsh pony Sally. The Sterlings' home was at the head of a narrow valley called Hatchholt on the eastern slopes of the Long Mynd. It stood close to one of the many reservoirs which supplied water to the Midland cities and which for all Peter's life had been in her father's charge.

Peter could not remember her mother, who had died when she was a baby. Her life had been spent in these lonely hills in the holidays and at school in Shrewsbury where her father had sent her as soon as she was old enough so that she might make friends of her own age. But Peter had never made friends easily, and although she had tolerated school and made reasonable progress, she had not been sorry to leave a fortnight ago. Soon she would be going to work in a big riding school at Ludlow, and this was a wonderful dream which was now coming true.

Today was one of the days when Peter was so happy that she wondered whether such happiness could last. There was so much for which to be thankful. It was a lovely day and yesterday's thunder had cleared the air. Not only was she riding over to the Mortons' house at Witchend to meet Jenny Harman who was going to spend at least a week with her at Hatchholt, but this evening the Mortons were arriving from London for the holidays and they would all be together every day.

But Peter was excited for another reason. In a few hours she was going to see David again. Her heart bumped and she felt the blood rising in her cheeks as she thought of him and of his last letter which was now in the pocket of her jeans. David had left school too and they were both sure that someday their lives were going to be spent together. Peter had always known that there would be nobody else for her, and it was true that her life had been changed when the Mortons first came to Witchend. It had all been easier because her father had liked the Mortons too, and apart from David

another wonderful thing had just happened - something she was longing to tell Jenny.

She leaned over the gate of the little paddock in which her pony spent most of its life. There were still many wild ponies on the Long Mynd and Peter knew Sally well enough to be sure that, given the opportunity, she might run with the herd again. The pony was up the hillside knee-deep in bracken and Peter put two fingers in her mouth and whistled inelegantly. Sally raised her head and trotted down to her mistress, and was duly rewarded with a hug and a carrot and then led over to the shed at the back of the cottage to be saddled.

By the time she was ready, Mr. Sterling had wakened and came over to her. Jenny had once said that she thought he had the kindest eyes of any man she had ever seen and Peter had loved her for it. So he had. Very blue with wrinkles at the corners in a face even more tanned than his daughter's.

"I would encourage you to walk, my dear, except that the pony is getting disgustingly fat. I suppose you will leave her at Witchend and walk back later with Jenny... You will be late, I expect, and I shall be asleep, so don't make too much noise."

Peter bent to kiss him and then rode away from Hatchholt.

Sally was frisky and Peter put her into a canter along the wide, grassy track at the side of a stream swollen by the recent rains. The valley was hot and there was no sign of life except two startled rabbits, some recently shorn sheep on the hillside looking strangely white against the bracken, and hundreds of little twittering meadow pipits flying over the water and the purple heather. Peter knew every inch of the way from Hatchholt to the little house named after the Witchend valley which had become her second home and which now meant so much to her.

The path left the stream and climbed up the side of the hill towards three hawthorn trees and Sally shook her head and flicked her tail in protest as the flies rose from the bracken. A black crow flapped lazily out of the biggest tree and when she reached it Peter stopped, as she always did, to look up to the west towards Pole Bank which is the summit of the Long

Mynd. Up here there was a welcome breeze, and she ran her fingers through her fair hair which she now wore nearly to her shoulders. She had brushed it longer than usual this morning and hoped that David would like it, although she did not suppose he would say so.

The view from the three hawthorns was one of which she never tired, for she was in the very heart of the hills and almost as high as Pole Bank over a mile away. As the cloud shadows chased each other over the moor, the heather and bilberries turned black, while the patches of bright green on the hillsides showed where the many tinkling streams began. Then, suddenly soaring like a bird, a scarlet glider dipped towards her and the pilot waved a hand in greeting. Peter and Sally were used to the gliders from the Gliding Club on the top of the Mynd and the pony did not even raise her head as this one whistled overhead.

Peter turned and looked to the south-east where the track meandered down a gentle valley towards Witchend and Ingles and the village of Onnybrook two miles beyond on the Shrewsbury-Ludlow road. It was serene country, as yet unspoiled, and not gaunt and forbidding like the Stiperstones in the shadow of which Jenny lived. And that reminded her that it was time she went on because they had promised to get a meal laid and the house tidied up before the Mortons arrived this evening.

Fifteen minutes later, where the track divided, Sally, without prompting, took the left-hand fork and there was the old farmhouse of Witchend set snugly against the hillside.

Jenny was sitting on the top bar of the gate and not until Peter whistled like a peewit - the Lone Piners' secret signal - did she look up. Then she jumped to the ground and ran to meet her.

"Peter! Isn't this wonderful! I've been here at least half an hour and thought you were never coming. I was so excited that I rode my beastly bike like a maniac and I'm exhausted and saddle sore. I came straight here. Didn't even stop at Ingles, and then I couldn't get in because I don't know where they keep the key... You look smashing, Peter. Honestly you do. What have you been doing to your hair? I wish mine would shine like yours."

Peter slipped off Sally's back. She was very fond of Jenny and there were no secrets between them.

"Sorry if I'm late. The key is under the water-butt, as you should remember, and we'd better go in and get busy. How are you, Jen? Why didn't you call in at Ingles? Tom working or something?"

Jenny's eager little face changed.

"No. It's his day off. When I spoke to him on the telephone the other day he said he would be going to Shrewsbury, but he's coming to supper presently with the others, of course."

"That's fine then," Peter said, but did not really mean it because it looked as if all was not well between Jenny and Tom and Peter was sure whose fault that was. She knew how easy it was to be hurt and this was not the first time that Tom had behaved thoughtlessly to Jenny.

"Open up the house, Jen," she said. "I'll be with you as soon as I've unsaddled Sally. You can ride her back to Hatchholt tonight if you like and I'll walk behind. My dad sent his love to you."

Jenny flashed her a smile, opened the farmyard gate and then ran round to the back. Peter suspected that she was near tears.

There was not much to do in the house except to lay the table for supper. Mrs. Ingles always came in to tidy up before the Mortons arrived and so the house was clean and the beds aired. The log fire in the ingle-nook was ready for a match to be put to the dry fir cones on which it was laid, but they decided not to light it until the sun had gone down. They staggered into the kitchen with two enormous cartons of groceries which had been left outside, and put most of the food away. While Peter cut piles of bread and butter she told Jenny her exciting news.

"Before the others come I want to tell you something. You know that we thought we would have to leave Hatchholt and that my father was going to live with Uncle Micah down Hereford way, and you know really how we both hated the idea?"

Jenny nearly dropped the cup she was holding.

"You mean you're not going? That your father can stay at Hatchholt?"

"No, Jen. He can't stay there another winter. He'd be cut off in snow, and when I'm at the stables in Ludlow I might not be able to get back to Hatchholt. You see, it's everybody else who says Daddy is now getting too old to spend so much time at Hatchholt alone, but I'm sure it would break his heart to leave the mountain now and the most wonderful thing has happened. The Mortons have asked him to come and live here and look after the house for them while they're in London. They're going to build a room on for him, and it's all been worked out so that Daddy pays a small rent and he has agreed because he says it's best for both of us. I'm going to share Mary's room and I can't tell you how wonderful they've been about it... Witchend has always been another home to me, Jen, and coming here won't make it seem so bad leaving Hatchholt. And of course the Ingles have been very kind too, and Daddy gets on so well with them that I shall never have to worry because they will only be half a mile away. And Mr. Morton is going to get Witchend on the telephone and I'm sure it's going to be wonderful."

Jenny agreed that it was and tried hard not to show how envious she was at her friend's good fortune. She was very quiet while they finished the table and then said suddenly:

"Let's go up to the old pine tree, Peter. We can see the road from there and watch for the car... And I've got something to tell you too, but my news is deadly secret and I'll never forgive you if you tell David or the twins."

On the hillside opposite the house was a pine tree standing guard like a lonely sentinel. This tree was the first secret camp of the Lone Piners, and under it was buried the old sardine tin containing the paper on which were written the rules of the Club and signed by all the members in their own blood. Under this tree they had sworn eternal friendship and to always be true to each other, and Peter knew that so far as David and she were concerned the childish oath they had taken together would be kept.

Jenny led the way up the narrow track through the bracken and between the gorse bushes which surrounded and hid the camp. The turf was green and springy after yesterday's storms, and Jenny leaned against the old tree and looked down the valley towards the chimneys of Ingles farm which were just visible above the tree-tops.

Peter saw her lips trembling and in that moment she realized that Jenny was growing up. For the first time Peter saw that her friend, whom most people thought of as an attractive little chatterbox, was no longer a schoolgirl. Not only was she very pretty, but when she turned and smiled rather miserably at Peter the latter knew that she was desperately unhappy.

She stepped forward impulsively.

"Tell me, Jenny. Is it trouble at home, or is it Tom? You know I shall understand. Tell me. You can trust me."

"I know that, Peter. Maybe you are the only single person in the whole world that I can... Truth is, Peter, I'm dreading the others coming and I'm such a coward that I nearly stayed at home. I would have done if you hadn't asked me to Hatchholt... No, Peter. Don't make a fuss of me. I can't stand that. Sit down on the grass and watch the road for David and don't look at me while I tell you."

Peter did as she was told.

"It's Tom, Peter... I don't want to use wrong words or silly, sloppy words but you know what Tom is to me, don't you? It's always been the same. Like you and David, and you found out the hard way too, didn't you? You told me how much he had hurt you once. I remember very well, but this is worse about Tom. He's talking of leaving Ingles. He says he's sick of farming and that life is too slow up here, buried in the country. He's made a new friend of a chap called Ned Stacey who is much older than he is. Over twenty I think. This Ned is a lorry driver and he works in Shrewsbury and has got a room there, but his mother lives on the new estate at Onnybrook and sometimes he comes back to the village at weekends. He used to come up to Ingles driving a milk lorry to collect the churns and that's how Tom knew him. Now he's persuaded Tom to get a motor-bike, which is fair enough, I

s'pose, but I think he's trying all the time to get Tom to go and work in Shrewsbury and learn to drive a lorry too. Tom doesn't seem to care about anybody but Ned now and I s'pose nobody should complain about that, but I do. I don't think he could ever be happy with anybody except me. Of course, being a man - or trying to be one - he doesn't know that and I shall have to tell him. What is so awful is that he says he doesn't want to be a farmer. It just isn't possible for him to leave Ingles when his uncle and aunt have been so marvellous to him there."

"Has he told them about all this?" Peter asked over her shoulder.

"I don't think so. He hasn't told me all this ghastly news at the same time. I made him tell me when he said he thought he'd have to go to Shrewsbury today. He's crazy about this Ned."

"You're jealous of him, Jenny. That's why you feel so awful about it. I don't suppose he's a bad chap really and Tom doesn't see any other boys of his own age, does he?"

"So you're going to take his side, are you? Why don't you talk some sense, Peter, instead of sitting down there like a prig. Of course I'm jealous. I've never seen Ned Stacey but I absolutely loathe him... He's taking Tom away from me. Tom doesn't care how I feel. Sometimes I think that he wouldn't even have told me about Ned if I hadn't made him. *He's changed, Peter.* That's the awful thing... If he leaves Ingles and goes to Shrewsbury to work I shall go there too. I can get a job there easy enough..."

Her voice ended on a sob and Peter got up and put her arms round her.

"I know how awful you feel, Jenny. Honestly I do, but you'll be silly if you show him too much. You may have to let him get over Ned and perhaps you wouldn't think so much of him if he hadn't any other men friends."

Jenny shook herself free.

"And what about leaving Ingles? Don't you think that's crazy? Who would want to drive a stinking lorry instead of working on a farm? I shouldn't think Mr. Ingles will mind saying what he thinks when he hears about this..."

And, I tell you another thing, Peter, I thought you were my friend and would understand how I feel, but it seems you're on Tom's side... He's insufferable."

"Maybe he is, but I think he's growing up like we are. Acksherley, as Mary would say, I'm on both your sides, and he has really promised you to come to supper tonight, hasn't he?"

"Yes. He'll come, I'm sure. He said he would and he keeps his word over things like that."

"It's always easier when you can talk together," Peter said wisely. "When we go back to Hatchholt tonight we'll get David and Tom to come with us and you can get him on your own and have it out - but I shouldn't let him see how mad you are with Ned."

This made Jenny laugh.

"Anyone would think you didn't want to be alone with David! All right, Peter. I expect you're being sensible and I've been in too much of a hurry as usual. It will be wonderful to see Tom anyway. And the others too, and here they are... You *swear* you won't tell anybody what I've just told you?"

Peter's heart was suddenly bumping so hard that she could barely speak and her throat was dry as she promised,

"I swear, Jenny. It will all come right, I'm sure," and began to run down the hill as the Mortons' old car with luggage on the roof crawled up the lane and pulled up outside the gate. She could see that David was driving - in his last letter he had told her that he had passed his Test and that as his father was not coming up to Witchend yet he would share the driving with his mother.

She realized then that perhaps she was in too much of an obvious hurry and so she slowed down and waited for Jenny. They saw the twins scramble out of the car and Peter whistled the peewit's haunting call until they looked up and recognized them. Mary waved and ran up to meet them while Dickie opened the gate for his brother to drive in.

Peter tried to conquer her shyness by making a fuss of Mary and talking very fast about how wonderful it was to see them and had they enjoyed the journey with David driving.

By this time they had reached the gate and Mrs. Morton made everything easy by coming across to meet them. She kissed the two girls and thanked them for coming early and opening up the house and chattered away about the journey as David came up.

"Hello, you two," he smiled, and Peter knew that he was as nervous as she was. He put an arm round each of them and gave them a hug and Jenny, impetuous as ever, stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek - and Peter did the same, Dickie then gave his famous impersonation of a wolf-whistle, Macbeth the Scottie barked his welcome, jumped up at them both and rushed excitedly round the farmyard in his joy at being back again in the country.

As they went into the house David took Peter's hand and held it so tightly that she nearly cried out with the pain.

"All right?" he whispered. "About us, I mean. Is it just the same?"

She nodded because the words she wanted to say would not come. She was overwhelmed with happiness. It was more than just the same. It was more wonderful.

"We'd better unpack before we eat," Mrs. Morton suggested. "We must run the risk of Dickie collapsing from starvation, but we shall have chaos if we leave everything until after supper. And we must wait for Tom. He is coming, isn't he, Jenny? We didn't stop at Ingles on the way. David seemed to want to press on."

"Of course he's coming, Mrs. Morton. We thought he would be here by now but he had to go to Shrewsbury. I expect he'll be along any minute... Would everybody like coffee? We didn't put it on until you came. By the time you've all unpacked the coffee will be hot and Tom will be here, I'm sure."

Mrs. Morton gave her a quick look of surprise and then just thanked her and went upstairs. As Jenny switched on the hotplates and moved the saucepan of milk across she turned impulsively to Peter.

"Why doesn't he come? He promised and he should be here by now. I bet that Ned is keeping him deliberately. I bet he is. He doesn't want Tom to have any other friends."

"That's nonsense, Jenny, and you know it. There must be a reason why he isn't here. Perhaps the bus has broken down and he's trying to get a lift. Of course he'll come."

"I wish there was a telephone here so that I could ring Ingles. *Do you think he's forgotten, Peter?* Perhaps he's been on Ned's motor-bike and there's been an accident?"

Peter tried to reassure her but was not much help because the twins then came downstairs and asked questions about Tom until they sensed that something was wrong. An awkward half-hour went by and then Mrs. Morton agreed that they should start supper. Jenny became quieter and quieter and Peter was distressed by the look of misery on her face as she struggled to eat. David noticed it too and, hoping to cheer her up, suggested that as soon as they had finished they might all walk down to Ingles and see what had happened to Tom.

"Don't bother, David, thank you all the same," Jenny replied. "I've got a very bad headache, and if Mrs. Morton will excuse me I think I'd like to go back to Hatchholt and go to bed. Peter will come with me. I'm sorry that Tom and I seem to have spoiled your lovely evening."

This did not seem at all like Jenny and Mrs. Morton was worried. She was very fond of Jenny and liked and admired Tom too. She was not sure whether the two of them had just quarrelled and she had certainly been surprised when Tom had not been here to meet them.

"Of course you can if you want to, my dear," she said. "I can give you some aspirin, but when you do go David will walk up with you. Try not to worry."

Before Jenny could answer, Macbeth rushed to the closed window barking furiously. They all looked round to see what had alarmed him and saw, on the other side of the glass, a man's face staring in at them. Macbeth, having attracted their attention, stopped barking and a sudden silence was broken by Jenny.

"Something terrible has happened to Tom," she whispered. "I knew it. That's Mr. Ingles."

3. Wednesday: The Green Necklace

Jenny woke early next morning. For a moment, when she opened her eyes, she wondered where she was. The bed was different, sunlight was dappling an unfamiliar wallpaper and there was no sound except the gentle breathing of someone else in the room and the monotonous cooing of a wood-pigeon.

She sat up, and bumped her head so hard on the sloping ceiling that tears came into her eyes. Then she realized that she was in Peter's room at Hatchholt, and memory of what had happened last night came rushing back. She remembered, as if she could see it now, the white face of Mr. Ingles staring at them through the window at Witchend. She remembered her own frightened cry at the certainty that something terrible had happened to Tom. All the evening, while they had been waiting for him in vain, she had been sure, but had dared not tell even Peter of her fears. She remembered rushing across the room and fumbling with the latch as David pushed her gently aside and whispered, "Take it easy, Jenny. Let him come in."

Then Mr. Ingles had come in, blinking in the sudden light and saying nothing until Mrs. Morton asked him to sit down and tell them his news. Before he spoke, he went over to Jenny and put an arm round her shoulders.

Although she was trembling and felt suddenly sick, Jenny remembered that she did not interrupt while he told them that the police had telephoned him after breakfast to tell them that Tom was in hospital in Northampton after an accident in a lorry, but was not seriously injured.

"I'm right sorry not to have left a message here for you all nor to have telephoned to Hatchholt. Truth is the missus was in such a state and I had to get someone from Onnybrook to give a hand with the milking. Police said that we could go and see him in hospital right away and so that's what we did. We've seen him and he's not that bad and I'm going over again tomorrow to fetch him... *Don't look at me like that, Jenny lass.* He's O.K. and lucky not to be worse. He was on a lorry driven by a pal of his and their story is that they were attacked by a gang of hijackers and knocked out.

Some decent chap picked 'em up at the side of the road and took them to hospital."

That was the gist of it. There was more talk of course, and Mr. Ingles had been very nice to her when she had gone out to the gate with him. He had told her not to worry, promised her again that Tom was not badly hurt, and that if he was well enough when he brought him home she could come and see him. When she had gone in Mrs. Morton had been sweet to her as well. She said she could stay at Witchend for the night if she wished, and go round early to Ingles in the morning.

But this did not seem sensible, so David had walked back with them to Hatchholt as the moon came up and promised to come again early in the morning with Sally. Mr. Sterling had gone to bed, so Peter and she had crept up to this little room under the rafters and strangely enough they had both quickly fallen asleep.

Jenny rubbed her head, got carefully out of bed and looked down at Peter who was still sleeping peacefully and looking very pretty. Peter, who was never demonstrative, had given Jenny the sort of friendship which she had already learned was very rare. Neither she nor David had said much about Tom on the walk home last night, but they understood how she was feeling. And the last thing that Peter had whispered to her when she had turned out the light was, "Just remember that it might have been much, much worse, Jen, and with luck you'll see him tomorrow. Think of tomorrow." And she did.

She tiptoed over to the window and looked out. There was a haze over the hills and a little mist on the track down which they had come last night. She knew that if she leaned out and looked to the right she would just be able to see the dam holding the water of the reservoir, but she did not do this because she suddenly heard somebody whistling. For a second she wondered if it was Tom, because he was the best whistler she had ever known. Then, out of the mist, came a rider on a horse. A young man who whistled a pop-tune as he rode out of the mist. As he came nearer Jenny saw that it was David on Sally, and she was angry because he did not seem to have a care in the world and had forgotten about Tom and was happy because he had come to see Peter.

She drew back from the window and was just going to wake Peter when David changed his tune and whistled the old familiar peewit's call. Jenny glanced at the little clock which Peter's father had given her and saw that it was only just seven o'clock. She was not sure whether Mr. Sterling would appreciate being wakened at this time by a bogus peewit, and as Peter did not stir she ran back to the window. David, still on Sally's back, was now just below her. She could see the dew gleaming on his hair and on the pony's mane. She saw him draw in his breath to whistle again, and then his face broke into a grin of welcome as she leaned out of the window.

"Hello, beautiful," he called. "Are you both awake?"

"Shut up!" she hissed. "You're not to wake Mr. Sterling, and Peter is still asleep."

"Wake her up then," he said. "I'll put Sally in the paddock and then I'm going up to the reservoir to swim. Tell Peter, and you come too, Jen. If I can't beat Peter I can just about deal with you. Don't be long and please ask if I may stay to breakfast."

Jenny watched him go and then turned round to wake Peter. She was already sitting up in bed.

"Jenny! Whoever are you talking to? It sounded like David."

"It was and is. He's come for a swim and breakfast. He says I can come too. It's a pity I'm not keener on swimming."

Peter was out of bed before she had finished speaking.

"Don't be silly, Jenny. There's a spare swimsuit in my bottom drawer - a green one that will be fine for you. Don't make a row and wake Daddy. We'll take him some tea when we get back."

Ten minutes later the two girls were at the reservoir. David was already in the water and called to them to come in. Jenny felt a sudden pang of jealousy as she saw Peter, in royal blue, standing straight and slim on the wall of the dam ready to dive in. Jenny was envious because she was a poor

swimmer and without the courage to follow her into the deep end. Tom was not very good either, although he splashed about and made plenty of noise, but he never fussed because she was not very keen. Peter must have guessed her thoughts for she turned and smiled at her as she pulled a white cap over her hair.

"Maybe we'll have Tom up here by the end of the week, Jen. I'd like to teach you to dive before he comes and that really will surprise him. Come in when you're ready. David is showing off and I'm going to race him the length."

She raised her arms, stood poised for a moment, and then dived into the clear water almost without a splash. Jenny watched her glide up to the surface like a seal and swim after David with a racing crawl that soon brought her up to him. It was obvious that they would not notice where she went in, so she ran along the bank to where the water was only about five feet deep, plucked up her courage and jumped. The shock of the cold water took her breath away and then she realized that she was swimming with rather desperate strokes - but really swimming. Suddenly she was enjoying it, and then David shouted, "You're doing fine, redhead. I shall never beat Peter and if you go on like this I'll never catch you either."

She had no breath to answer, but with renewed confidence she swam across the reservoir and then climbed out and lay for a few minutes in the pale sunshine and watched the other two enjoying themselves. And that reminded her of Tom and that Mr. Sterling did not yet know what had happened to him.

"I'm going back to the house to help your father with the breakfast," she called to Peter. "I'll warn him that David is here and tell him about Tom."

She ran down the hill to the cottage and was surprised to see Mr. Sterling standing in the porch. He was bare-headed and wearing a very clean, but faded dark blue shirt, khaki slacks and well-polished brown shoes. His hair was thick and white, his face brown and wrinkled, and he wore old-fashioned, steel-rimmed spectacles. When he smiled, as he did as soon as Jenny ran up, he reminded her of a genial gnome.

"Very pleased to see you, my dear. You were both quiet when you came in last night. Most considerate. I see you brought Sally home. Where is Petronella and had you not better go and dress?"

Jenny explained about David.

"And he said please could he stay to breakfast - if it doesn't put you out, of course. I'm not as keen on swimming as the others, so I've come back to help you get it ready and tell you about Tom."

"Go and put your clothes on, my dear, and come down to the kitchen. I know about Tom. Alfred Ingles has just telephoned to tell me that he has already rung the hospital. Tom is fine, had a good night and Ingles is going to fetch him home later today."

When Jenny came down ten minutes later the house was full of the delicious smell of frying bacon. The little kitchen in which the Sterlings took their meals gleamed like a ship's galley. Mr. Sterling was not only tidy but eccentric about tidiness. He had a tidy mind and tidy speech. He always said precisely what he meant in words that anybody could understand, and never used slang. He was out of doors whenever he could but read a great deal in the evenings. He liked cooking so long as he was not fussed and worried, and did his own shopping in Onnybrook three or four times a week. He was also very fond of the Lone Piners and Jenny knew that he had a high opinion of both Tom and David. She would have liked to have talked to Mr. Sterling about Tom and Ned Stacey, but before she could do so Peter and David arrived.

There was only just room for four round the table and they were all so hungry that the crisp bacon and fried eggs disappeared in silence. This was followed by brown bread and butter and bilberry jelly made by Mr. Sterling from fruit ripened on the hillsides of the Mynd.

"Please tell us again what Mr. Ingles said about Tom," Jenny pleaded. "He told us hardly anything last night, and all we know is that he was with this boy Stacey who was driving a lorry to London when they were held up by a gang and beaten up. I bet Tom was the first to fight them."

"I daresay he was, my dear, and we all hope you will be able to ask him yourself when he comes home later today. His uncle told me on the telephone just now that Tom was angry because he and Ned Stacey were so easily fooled by the bandits, but he didn't say how. The police had interviewed him just before Mr. Ingles arrived and they told him that the lorry was carrying cigarettes, all of which have been stolen. It's a disgraceful state of affairs... What are you all going to do today? Mr. Ingles will be on his way to Northampton by now, and is not likely to be back until after noon. Why don't you all go down to Onnybrook and look round? You may remember, David, that when you were last here about three months ago we were all worried when Pontesford Hall had been put up for sale after the sudden death of eccentric Miss Pontesford."

"I do remember," David agreed. "I can also remember seeing the old lady looking rather like a grey scarecrow stalking over the hills by herself. She looked rather terrifying but Peter told me once that she was a sad and lonely old woman."

"And peculiar," Peter added. "Nobody really liked her in the village and yet she was part of us. Once you took me to a church fete in the grounds, Daddy, and it rained all the time. Everything was overgrown and very gloomy. What Mary would call 'ghosty'."

"Has anybody bought it yet?" Jenny asked. "I like romantic old places. Do you s'pose that Miss Pontesford's ghost might still haunt the Hall."

"I don't know about ghosts," Mr. Sterling said as he passed his cup to Peter for more coffee, "but everybody round here is pleased because it's been bought by a nice elderly couple called Panthill. They're having a lot of alterations made and the grounds are being tidied up, and if they hadn't bought the place we might have had a road-house, or a small factory or blocks of flats or something which wouldn't have been any use to the village... Terrible things can happen when an old estate is broken up, but now Onnybrook is most fortunate. Both the Colonel and Mrs. Panthill have been kind and considerate, although quite rightly they keep themselves to themselves. I hear that they have offered their grounds for the flower show next Saturday as well as making a handsome contribution towards expenses. We must all go to the flower show... Yes. I am told that the

newcomers will be well liked here and it will be a pleasure to meet them... What are you all going to do today? You must remember that Tom is not going to feel up to much when he comes back. He will probably have to be kept quiet for a day or two."

Jenny wondered whether Mr. Sterling knew that Tom was so unsettled and that he wanted to leave the farm. She was not even sure that Alf Ingles himself knew. Tom had been so odd on the telephone, and she did not even know whether he had discussed it with his uncle and aunt. Mr. Sterling was very wise and understanding and perhaps she could talk to him about it presently. He would understand. She knew that Mr. and Mrs. Ingles liked her but they were difficult to talk to. She looked up and saw Mr. Sterling's kind eyes watching her over the tops of his spectacles.

"There are too many people in this small kitchen," he smiled. "Jenny will help me to tidy up while Petronella takes David to see if Sally has been ill-treated while she has been away."

So he's not only a nice little gnome, Jenny thought as the other two went out into the sunshine willingly enough, he's cunning too and can read people's thoughts. He's just read mine.

"I wanted to talk to you about Tom," the gnome said as he neatly stacked the dirty plates on a tray. "You must not fuss him, Jenny, or be upset yourself if he seems to want a change from Ingles... You need not look so surprised, my dear, Tom talked to me a little one day, and although I do not know much about young Ned Stacey, it is not surprising that Tom is beginning to wonder whether he is ever going to get away from Ingles and sometimes have a chance to make his own decisions."

Jenny turned away so that he should not see the tears in her eyes.

"Ned wants to take him away from all his friends and from the farm. We don't know yet why Tom didn't come home last night and why he was such a fool as to go on that lorry... It's just that he's *different*, Mr. Sterling. Something has happened to him. He doesn't seem to want the old things - and I'm very, very unhappy."

Suddenly she found herself held close against Mr. Sterling's blue shirt which she was sure was going to be stained by her foolish tears. She could smell the shaving soap he used, and when she tried to move she felt his arm firmly against her shoulders and she was comforted.

"There, there, my dear," he said quietly. "Of course something has happened to Tom. Something has happened to you, too. You're both growing up. Of course he is different and so are you. So is my Petronella for the same reason. To be young, Jenny, is not always to be happy, as you are learning. If you will be patient I think Tom will listen to what you say. He is tired of Ingles because his uncle has not realized that he is growing up. He orders Tom about - not because he doesn't like, admire and respect him, but because he is that sort of man and has never had any children of his own... When you see Tom you will not *blame* him for anything he has done and you might be wise if you tried to like Ned."

Jenny gulped and shook her head until Mr. Sterling gently released her and passed her a clean handkerchief.

"You will certainly have to try to like Tom's friends," he added.

"I believe that Ned is trying to make Tom go and live in Shrewsbury and work in this lorry place," she whispered.

"I think it's silly for Tom to give up farming. He's good at it."

"Ah yes," Mr. Sterling agreed. "I think he is too, but he'll have to find that out for himself. Farming is a better job in the end than driving lorries, but you will have to realize that it may be a good thing for Tom to go away from Ingles for a while and get experience on a larger farm. I'm sure you'll be able to help him in time, my dear... Now dry your eyes and go up and tidy your bedroom and leave me to make this all shipshape. I shall probably go down to Witchend presently to see Mrs. Morton who has been very good to us. I expect Petronella has told you our news?"

Jenny gave him a hug.

"Thank you for being so kind. I love coming here but it will be wonderful coming to Witchend and finding you there too. Peter told me last night, and if I wasn't so selfish I should have told you before how happy we shall all be. I'll try to be good about Tom, I promise."

Pontesford Hall was on the northern outskirts of the village of Onnybrook. It was a large, rambling Tudor house hidden from the main road to Shrewsbury by a grove of trees and some overgrown shrubberies, and anyone coming from Hatchholt to the village must pass the gates.

As Jenny, David and Peter walked down the little valley beside the pipeline from the reservoir the latter told them everything else she could remember about the place.

"I know you will be excited about this, Jenny, but the Hall is supposed to be haunted. I've forgotten who by but it's probably a Cavalier. And there was a story about hidden treasure, I believe. We must ask Daddy about that. It is the sort of house that would have a ghost and a treasure and I should think secret passages as well, but nobody who I know ever went into the grounds while old Miss Pontesford was alive - except for that ghastly church fete. It would be fun to see it, wouldn't it? Perhaps the new man will open up the house next Saturday for the flower show. I'd love to see it. Let's all go."

"You can make your own arrangements, of course," Jenny said. "Just go ahead, you two, but you seem to have forgotten Tom. How do you know he'll be well enough? I'm not going without him... What was the matter with old Miss P. anyway? If she was very, very poor you would have thought she would have pulled the house down to find the treasure. Was she really poor or just crazy?"

"Both, I think, and lonely I'm sure. Daddy told me that she was the last of the Pontesfords. There was a nephew who went abroad somewhere but he's dead now. Anyway she didn't like him and she didn't like anybody in the village either. I think it's very sad that there should be unhappy, lonely people like her. Daddy told me that there weren't many at her funeral and the Hall had to be sold because she owed a lot of money."

"P'raps she'll haunt the place now," David suggested. "The gates are just down the road here, aren't they, Peter? I'd like to go in and see what the house looks like. We shouldn't be doing any harm."

The entrance to the Hall was on a rather dangerous corner. The gate between high stone walls looked as if it had not been closed for years and that if anybody tried it would fall off its hinges. On one of the gateposts was fixed a board on which was a bold, hand-lettered poster announcing that the Onnybrook Annual Flower Show and Gala, which was to be held in the grounds of Pontesford Hall next Saturday, was "By kind permission of Lt.-Col. Charles Panthill."

The drive had obviously been in a very bad condition but was now being patched up. David walked up it a few yards and called to the others to follow him.

"But we're trespassing," Jenny protested, as she followed Peter, and at that moment they heard a familiar voice behind them.

"I am sorry to inform you," Dickie Morton was saying loud and clear. "We are almost ashamed to tell you, aren't we, twin, that the loutish young man ahead of those two plain girls is our brother."

"That's right," his sister Mary echoed. "That's who it is. He abandoned us this morning before breakfast without even bidding our mother farewell. This is the entrance to Pontesford Hall."

"An' if you would like to see it," Dickie broke in, "so would we and we'll come along with you without taking any notice of these other people an' ask Mr. Hillpants-----"

"Panthill, twin," Mary interrupted. "It says it on the notice," and then in a very different tone of voice she spoke to the young woman with them, "And may we ask if this is your first visit to our country?"

An attractive feminine voice in an accent they did not recognize agreed that this was the first time she had been to England. As David, Peter and Jenny turned round, the former whispered, "Who have they found now?"

The twins were dressed alike in blue jeans and dark blue shirts but Jenny had noticed last night that Mary now wore her hair almost as short as Dickie. And as usual Macbeth, their Scottie dog; was standing between them. The woman with them looked not much more than thirty although her dark hair was streaked with grey. She was simply dressed but looked rather sad until she smiled as David stepped forward.

"I apologize for those two," he said. "Is there anything we can do to help or would you like to be left with the twins? We were wondering whether the owner would mind if we went to look at the house from the outside. Or perhaps you know Colonel Panthill?"

She regarded them with steady grey eyes and then said, "My name is Amanda Gray. I come from New Zealand and this is my first visit to England. I want to see as many old things as I can. Someone I know way back home told me about Shropshire and the old castles and churches and houses and so I came up here to see some. I'm staying at the inn for a few nights and I read about Pontesford Hall in a book and I want to see it. I think it must be wonderful and romantic. It is the sort of house I would like to photograph in colour, and although I don't know the owner, I wouldn't mind asking him... I met your brother and sister in the street and asked them the way. What is your name?"

David told her and introduced the two girls and then glared at the twins who seemed amused by the situation.

"I s'pose you're going to suggest that Mrs. Gray, who we think we like, should now be placed in your care," Mary said. "An' don't trouble to answer because wherever you go we are coming too. You don't know it yet but we knew we were going to meet you here."

"You may think that it's an act of Fate," Dickie continued, "but we make Fate work. We telephoned Mr. Sterling to ask where you were skulking - and here you are skulking with these two damsels."

By this time Mrs. Gray was looking as bewildered as most adults did at a first meeting with the Morton twins, but before she could say anything a

slight, very upright, military-looking man came round the corner of the drive from the direction of the house.

Colonel Panthill was smartly dressed in a tweed suit and highly polished brown shoes. His face was tanned, his eyes were a hard, bright blue and he wore a small, neatly trimmed moustache. He stared at them for a moment or two without speaking and then fixed an eyeglass in his right eye and looked carefully at the twins. Then to their relief he smiled.

"Good morning. I wonder if you have lost your way, or were you looking for me? I am Colonel Panthill."

"And we should apologize," Peter said quickly. "We were curious and wanted to see your house. I'm afraid we've been rather rude in trespassing."

The Colonel bent to pat Macbeth who was sniffing in a friendly way at his ankles.

"Nice little dog," he said. "Take care of him. Afraid I must ask you to leave. We have not been here very long and we are making a lot of structural alterations to the house. Trying to tidy the grounds too, ready for your flower show on Saturday. Workmen all over the place. So I must ask you to respect my privacy until then, if you please."

Surprisingly then Mrs. Gray asked him if she might look over the Hall on Saturday, explaining, as she had done to the others, that she was from New Zealand and particularly interested in Tudor buildings.

"I am sorry to refuse you, madam, but we have decided never to open our house to the public. I hope you will understand that Pontesford Hall is our new home. Later on perhaps we may open part of the grounds to the village but not my house. Meanwhile I hope we shall see you all on Saturday... Good morning to you."

He watched them until they turned a corner between some overgrown rhododendron bushes. Mary turned to wave back to him and he smiled as he raised his hand before walking back to the house.

Meanwhile the others were feeling rather chastened.

"What did I tell you?" Jenny demanded. "I knew we were trespassing. I think he made us all look rather silly."

"He's a nice old man," was Mary's comment. "He liked Mackie... Don't you worry too much, Mrs. Gray. When we get to know him better we'll ask him to let you look over the house. Or would another old house do? There are plenty round here, acksherley."

This amused Mrs. Gray who said she would like to see any old mansions, but the guidebook had said that Pontesford had got a wonderful old oak staircase.

"I can't understand why he couldn't let us see it, but I shall come on Saturday and it will be fun to meet you all again then. Do you all live here?"

Peter explained and Mrs. Gray had just asked them all to have an ice-cream at Onnybrook's only cafe when they heard a car coming. They were only a few yards from the gate into the main road and Dickie automatically looked round for the dog, who was twenty or thirty yards behind them, having just emerged from some private exploration under the rhododendron bushes. At that moment a small lorry came round the blind corner in the drive at an excessive speed straight at Mackie who was pursuing his independent way in the middle of the road.

Mary shouted as the driver braked hard, sounded his horn and swerved as the startled dog jumped for safety. The man had to slow down at the gate, but to their surprise, instead of apologizing, he swore at them and told them to keep their dog under control. David was so astonished and angry that he never thought of taking the number of the lorry, but he did notice that there was no name on the side and that it was loaded with old bricks and rubble and other building materials.

None of them had ever seen the driver or the lorry before, and Peter remarked that whatever the Colonel was doing to help the village he certainly was not employing local labour.

Although the twins had no objection to refreshment at any time, the others were not keen. Jenny wanted to telephone Ingles to find when Tom was expected and to go up there as soon as possible, and David and Peter would really rather have gone off somewhere together. But Amanda Gray was oddly persistent and made it clear that she wanted to show her thanks by entertaining them, and so they went off together to the rather grubby little cafe called The Apple Tree. When they discussed this meeting later they all admitted that they were rather puzzled by her. She was pleasant enough and rather attractive but not expensively dressed, and when they all had drinks or ices in front of them she asked many questions about Pontesford Hall and the previous owner, most of which they were unable to answer. At length it dawned on Peter that she was asking all the time and not telling, and so, rather skilfully, she turned the conversation.

"But we don't really know much about old Miss Pontesford, Mrs. Gray. She wasn't the sort of person who wanted people to know her and none of us has been inside the house. Of course there are rumours about ghosts and that sort of thing. There always are gossipers in villages and wherever you go in England you'll find that. You should see Ludlow Castle while you're here, by the way, but of course that is a ruin... Now won't you tell us something about New Zealand, and where you live and what you do? What are the farms like? I suppose ours seem very small to you?"

For a moment she looked disconcerted and was saved from answering by Jenny who suddenly pushed back her chair, which was facing the windows, and shouted, "Look! That's Mr. Ingles' Land Rover. He's back already. I saw Tom sitting beside him and he's got a bandage round his head... We must go now. It will take half an hour to walk up to the farm."

So that was the end of that little party. David thanked Mrs. Gray for her hospitality and explained that Tom was a friend who was just being brought back from hospital.

Mr. Ingles was in the farmyard as they arrived.

"Tom's O.K.," he roared at them in his usual style. "Got a bit of a headache and has gone up to his room. Doctor says he must rest for a day or two and his Aunt Betty is fussing over him... He'll tell you all about it sometime but

from what I hear he ought to get a medal... But come in, all of you. Come in and welcome. Must say this place is all the brighter when the Mortons arrive at Witchend."

"What happened to Ned Stacey?" Jenny asked. "It's all his fault. That Tom is hurt, I mean. If Tom hadn't gone with Ned he'd be all right now, wouldn't he?"

The farmer looked at her in surprise.

"Ned is hurt bad," Mr. Ingles said. "I don't hold with Tom going off with him and I didn't know he was going on the lorry. I don't want to say anything more about that now and you'd better forget it too, Jenny my lass. Tom is lucky and so are we to have him back so soon. From what I hear both the lads deserve a medal... Now go in and see the missus. She'll give you a cup o' something and tell you not to worry Tom."

Mrs. Ingles was in the kitchen and was pleased to see them, although she was more pessimistic about Tom than her husband.

"He hasn't told me much yet, my dear. Hasn't been time, but he's to go to bed for twenty-four hours and he's not to be bothered... You mustn't be worried when you do see him - tomorrow maybe - he's that pale from loss o' blood-----"

"Loss of blood?" Jenny gasped, and went very pale herself. "They wouldn't send him home from hospital unless he was well enough though, would they? He isn't really ill, is he?"

"He's been punched in the jaw and hit on the head, so he says," Mrs. Ingles replied. "Defending his pal he was, and we can trust our Tom to put up a good fight, can't we? And that he's done, I'm told, and the police are very pleased. Not to worry too much though... He'll be feeling more himself tomorrow and you can see him then."

Before anybody could answer, the door opened and in came Tom wearing dressing gown and pyjamas and with the bandage still round his head. He gave them his usual cheerful grin, but they all saw a bruise on his chin

which looked almost purple against the pallor which was apparent under his tan.

"Hello, you lot," he said. "Couldn't sleep for the din. How's things?"

They all began to speak at once, but Peter noticed first that he did not have any special greeting for Jenny and then that he suddenly swayed a little and grabbed the back of a chair. It was obvious that he was still shaky and that he should not be bothered with them all now. She gave David a meaning look and stepped forward.

"We'll come and see you tomorrow, Tom," she said. "You'll be feeling better then and we all want to hear what you've been up to. And Jenny has got something very special to tell you. See you soon, Tom. It's grand to have you back."

Somehow she got the others, including Mrs. Ingles, out of the room and Jenny was left alone with Tom - one each side of the big kitchen table, staring at each other without words.

For a moment Jenny felt as if she had never seen him before. She wanted to ask him many questions and to tell him so much, but she was shy. He was the one who ought to be making it easy for them both. To be doing something instead of just standing there holding the back of the chair so hard that his knuckles were white.

At last he spoke. "Hello, Jen. Good to see you. You O.K.?"

"No, I'm not O.K., Tom. How do you think your friends felt when you didn't come as promised to supper at Witchend, but went off with that Ned Stacey instead and got yourself bashed up? D'you think I felt O.K. last night when your uncle had to come and tell us that you were in hospital? You're a fool sometimes, Tom. And selfish too... You don't seem to understand that you make your friends unhappy..."

She felt the angry tears in her eyes and was furious with herself. She had meant to be cool and polite to him. Very cool. To regret his accident but to show him that she did not really care. Now it was too late. She never had

been the sort of girl to hide her feelings. Just because she had not had a lot of love in her life she wanted all she could get now and for ever. She looked up again, no longer caring whether he saw her tears. She might as well tell him now what had to be told.

"One more thing, Tom, and then I'm going. Not only do you scare us all but you needn't have done it. You needn't have gone with Ned Stacey when you had promised to come to supper at Witchend. You might have stayed here and come to meet me instead of going to Shrewsbury. You know you might. Ned is no good to you, Tom, and you know it. He gets you into trouble."

This stung him and he flushed with anger.

"Don't be silly, Jen. You don't know anything about it. Anyway I want you all to help Ned. He's been framed. Yes, he has. I'm sure of it. They wouldn't let me see him in the hospital because he's hurt much worse than me. He's a good chap, Jen, and was much braver than I was. He tried to take on two of them. Somebody made a fool of him by telling him to drive the lorry down a narrow lane. That somebody wanted to get him off the main road and we were followed by some thugs in a furniture van... It was a trap and I'm glad I was with him. I'm going to speak up for Ned and nothing you or anybody else says or does is going to stop me."

He came round the table and stood before her with his hands in the pockets of his dressing gown.

"I'm sorry about last night. Honest I am. I should have let you know but don't let's have a row now... I got something for you in town before I went to meet Ned. It's been in my pocket all the time... Here! Hope you like it."

She looked up and met his eyes as he handed her a little white box. She saw the dark bruise on his face and touched it gently with her fingers. For a moment or two she could not speak. After all he had remembered her, and on his way to meet Ned.

"Go on," he smiled. "Open it, Hope I've got the right colour."

She took off the lid, and there, in a little nest of white cotton wool, was a glorious, gleaming necklace of emerald-green beads.

"Oh, Tom!" she whispered. "They're wonderful. They're my very own colour. You're wonderful to me, Tom, and I've just been so horrible to you. Thank you, Tom. Put them on please and tell me if you like them. Go on, Tom. I want you to. They are the most wonderful surprise present I have ever had in my life."

She no longer felt shy. She stood before him with her hands behind her back. She smiled into his eyes and then bent her head so that he could fix the clasp and this he found difficult because his fingers were shaking. When it was done he stepped back to look at her and was suddenly sure that he had never seen such happiness in anyone's face.

"Come here, Tom," she whispered. "I want to thank you."

She clutched the lapels of his old dressing gown, stood on tiptoe and kissed him as he had never been kissed before, then she turned on her heels and left. Tom was still standing dazed in the middle of the room when Mrs. Ingles came back.

"Time you went back to bed, Tom... Young Jenny just rushed past me after the others. That girl is growing up mighty fast."

"I know," agreed Tom and went upstairs.

4. Wednesday: "Mister" Cantor

About noon on the morning of the day on which Tom was fetched from hospital four men were meeting in a room in the Midland Police Headquarters. Three of them were detective-inspectors and the fourth, sitting behind a big desk, was the Chief Constable, who had called the meeting. None of them looked like policemen, nor indeed what most people believed a detective should look like. This was one reason why they were successful.

The Chief Constable had once been a soldier and looked like one. One of the inspectors was tall and thin and had hardly ever been seen to smile. The man sitting next to him was black-haired and burly and might have been mistaken for a professional footballer. The fourth man was the most unusual of them all. His name was Cantor. He was short and stout, with a rosy, innocent face and on certain occasions wore spectacles (the lenses were of plain glass) with heavy horn sides. Because he was nearly bald he looked many years older than his age. Many criminals had cause to remember how easy it had been to be completely fooled by him. Inspector Charles Cantor was strong and tough with a keen brain. He was a very good detective and while the Chief was speaking his eyes never left the older man's face. Cantor was a good listener and was the sort of man who only spoke when he had something worth saying. He had a reputation for courtesy, integrity, physical courage and hatred of crime. He despised dishonesty and was always angered by the harm that criminals did to innocent people. His colleagues nicknamed him "Mister".

The Chief Constable spoke.

"The subject, gentlemen, is the hijacking of lorries. The problem is urgent. You have all experienced some of this in your districts lately, and Mister here will tell us presently of that bad business in Harrow Lane near Towcester on Monday night... I have had another directive from London this morning. They suggest that we're only at the beginning of a crime wave of hijacking and that it's up to all Divisions to make plans today to stop this business. They think that these bandits may be organized by a mastermind."

He turned and pointed to a large-scale map of the Midland counties on the wall behind him.

"The yellow flags show the position of hold-ups in our area in the last three weeks. There are fifteen. We have never had so many in so short a time, and unless we can stop it now we can be sure that it will be worse as soon as the nights get longer. So far, six of them have been very valuable cargoes - cigarettes and liquor mostly - which are easy to dispose of. You all know what will happen if we ask for assistance from other areas. Even if we got three or four extra patrol cars, or asked for more help, the chances are that this is exactly what the enemy would expect us to do. If we get some extra men their own areas will miss them badly and the hijackers may move in to those while some of our problems here are still unsolved. That's what they want. They seem to be concentrating on a smallish area like this, and then when some of the other areas have been weakened they'll move in there. See the idea?"

The big, burly man was the first to reply.

"Yes, sir. That would be the scheme. Is the suggestion that all these jobs are being organized by one man and each hold-up is part of a bigger plan? Certainly looks as if somebody has got advance information. Maybe we should all go and talk again to the owners or hirers of the lorries. That could be where the whole business starts. Information about what goods are travelling in certain lorries and probably what routes they'll take. Might be worth while to see if we can pick up something new."

The Chief agreed that this would be worth trying, as there seemed little doubt that the operation was being centrally planned.

Cantor was then asked to report on the latest incident concerning the lorry from the Swift and Sure people in Shrewsbury which was hijacked in a lane near The Harrow two nights ago. "Mister" spoke in a gentle and almost hesitant way.

"This is an unpleasant affair with some unusual features. I have seen the young driver called Stacey in hospital this morning. He is out of danger and will be able to go home in a day or two. I see no reason at present to doubt

his story. He maintains that he was given instructions by his boss to turn left at The Harrow and make a detour through the lanes before rejoining the main road near Towcester. As soon as he turned off he realized that he was being followed by a removal van driving on side-lights until the driver was ready to force him into the ditch. He claims that there were two men but is unable to give a description of either as they were masked. All the cigarettes were stolen and no doubt the furniture van has now changed number plates and has an entirely different identity. We have not yet found it. It's probably in London."

"You will have checked with the Swift and Sure, of course? Had the driver been given these instructions?"

"The manager to whom I have spoken on the telephone denies this... He admits that this was young Stacey's first long night trip, but that he had to give him a chance because he was so short of men during the holiday period. I shall be seeing this manager and inviting him to make a statement later today."

The third detective, who had not yet spoken, looked up.

"What do we know of this young man, Mister? Could be that he'd been bribed to turn the lorry off the road there. Wouldn't be the first time that somebody has taken a knock on the head to prove his innocence."

Cantor would not agree to this.

"He's one of the long-haired boys but I believe he's telling the truth. He's got a room in Shrewsbury - we'll check that - and an old mother in a council house at Onnybrook. His story was confirmed by the other lad I saw yesterday."

"Ah yes," the Chief agreed. "There was another boy who also got off lightly. Thumbing a lift no doubt. What do we know about him?"

Cantor smiled. "Quite a lot, oddly enough. I've met young Tom Ingles more than once in the course of my duties. Nice boy though a bit restive. Works on his uncle's farm up on the Mynd. He met young Stacey in Shrewsbury

on Monday by arrangement, and was asked to travel in the cabin some of the way south and get a lift back in a lorry going north. He telephoned his uncle to say he wouldn't be back until morning and old man Ingles confirms this. Tom says that Stacey told him about the instructions that he'd been given by the manager almost as soon as he met him. I believe him."

"And yet the manager denies it," the Chief said as he refilled his pipe.

"Good idea to see this man again. Can't help feeling that he was running a big risk by entrusting a comparatively inexperienced driver with such a valuable load. We'd like to find those cigarettes - and the van. Who picked up those two boys?"

"They were lucky, sir. Both of them were more or less unconscious, although young Tom was on his knees at the edge of the ditch when a man and his wife came along in a car. I saw him yesterday. A Colonel Panthill, who, incidentally, has just come to live at Pontesford Hall, Onnybrook. This couple had been dining with some friends near Towcester. As soon as he saw the state these two lads were in, he got them into the back of his car and drove them straight to hospital at Northampton. He told me that a glance at the lorry proved what had happened and he decided to deal with the wounded before telephoning the police, which he did from the hospital. He said that they didn't like the look of Stacey, so decided to waste no time. I don't consider that we could have done any more if we'd been told ten minutes earlier. Stacey doesn't remember anything of this and young Ingles has no idea of the time they were picked up. Doesn't even remember the car - only being on a stretcher. He says he got the alarm siren working before two men got at him and that they were rather touchy about it,"

"Does the lorry itself tell us anything?"

"No, sir. No fingerprints on the back or the doors of the cab. Windscreen smashed. Plenty of indication of a struggle. In my opinion those two boys put up a very courageous show."

"There are no witnesses," the Chief persisted. "Young Stacey had better be watched when he comes out of hospital. It would be interesting also to know what visitors he has before he goes home... And a very good idea, Mister, for you to see the manager of Swift and Sure who entrusted such a

valuable cargo to so young and comparatively inexperienced a driver... See the boy again anyway."

The Chief went on... "All this may be organized, by a man or a woman, like a military exercise and using shortwave radio. We must get some of the men who wear the masks and actually do the job and persuade them to talk."

Cantor suggested, "May be just a voice to them. Orders may come to them by post, using a code, over the telephone from a call-box or, as you say, sir, by short-wave radio. Radio can be traced. Maybe we should draw a circle of fifty miles' radius with Birmingham as the centre on this map and watch every road and search every lorry and van which might be carrying stolen goods. Cigarettes and liquor in bulk must be hidden somewhere - or passed over quickly to somebody expecting the loot. If we had enough men we could search the country more thoroughly and even follow suspicious vans or lorries. The small operators doing the dirty work on the roads might lead us nearer to the centre if enough of them would talk as I said just now. But the way to get the big fellow is surely to set a trap."

"What type?" the big detective asked. "A furniture van full of coppers, for instance? That would shake them."

"It would!" the Chief agreed. "It would shake me too if it worked... We might start some rumours of valuable articles to be moved from the Midlands to London - or somewhere on the south coast - by road. We could put two or three enquiries out to different road hauliers, at the same time asking for quotations for the job. We could send the selected firm a fake load for the lorry and then wait to see how long before the enemy goes into action. We could then follow them for a change. That would help."

It was agreed that this last plan of decoy loads was worth trying and then the meeting broke up. Cantor was the last at the door and the Chief called him back into the room.

"This is a big job, Mister, and I've a hunch that most of the bother is going to be yours. Call on me if you want any special help, although I'm sure we've got to try and work this on our own. I'd like another word with you tomorrow anyway, after you've seen Stacey again. Get a statement from the

Swift and Sure people... And there could be some disappointed crooks about who might give us a little information at a price. Rumours soon get round amongst these boys."

"Yes, sir," Cantor agreed. "We have our contacts of course, but nothing has come in yet. It may, although whoever is organizing this business is as big as anything we've struck for a long time... I wonder what made you suggest that it might be a woman?"

5. Thursday: Three Black Crows

The valleys - or gutters - which cut into the steep slopes of the eastern side of the Long Mynd are all subtly different, although they have one thing in common. The streams which begin in the bogs almost as high as the top of the great plateau nearly all start as tiny trickles. A few come bubbling out of a sandy basin, but wherever and however they are born they soon grow into lusty youngsters. As the valleys twist and turn between the great bluffs of the mountain more water flows down under the bracken and between the heather and bilberries to join the main stream. Always in the gutters of the Mynd is the music of running water on its way to the rivers Onny, Teme, and the mighty Severn on its way to the sea.

On the afternoon after Tom's homecoming the Morton twins were alone at Witchend. They liked each other's company and were, to some extent, indispensable to each other, but they hated being ignored by their elders. David and Peter had wandered off together and Jenny and Mrs. Morton had gone down to Ingles - the former to see Tom and the latter in case she could help the farmer's wife.

When they were by themselves the twins abandoned the curious conversational mannerisms which they used with such effect on most adults, and were not as talkative with each other as they were with their family or friends. There was no need for them to be, for sometimes they seemed to be able to read each other's thoughts.

They sat together on the top bar of the gate and watched the storm-clouds piling up again over the Mynd. From far, far away over the mountains of Wales there came the faint rumble of thunder which soon died away, and then the only sound was the panting of Macbeth as he lay on the ground under the hedge. He loathed thunder.

Mary wiped the perspiration from her forehead with her arm and looked at her twin.

"You're a bit feeble today, aren't you? You didn't say much when the others skulked off on their selfish business. I'm not going to sit here all the afternoon and that's not just because the top of this gate seems to be much harder than it used to be. I am browned off, twin. I want to do something exciting and I don't care if we get wet through when the storm comes. What shall we do?"

Dickie jumped off the gate and rubbed his behind.

"You're right. It's getting harder. Let's get into our swimming things and shorts and go up Callow Batch. If somebody hasn't broken our dam we can bathe in the pool and it doesn't matter how hard it rains."

Callow Batch was the least known of the Long Mynd valleys. It was rockier and more forbidding than the others. It was steeper too and in one place there was a waterfall of about six feet. Last summer the twins had deepened the pool into which it fell by damming the outfall with large stones and lumps of turf and had managed to keep what they called their "watering place" a secret from the others.

Ten minutes later they were on their way, with Macbeth, still rather depressed, trotting at their feet. They climbed first up and over the hill on which the lone pine stood, and then by a narrow track through the bilberries towards a hill crowned by an outcrop of curious flat rocks. Occasionally a sultry puff of wind fanned their hot faces, but the only sound was the scuffle of their shoes through the heather. When they reached the flat rocks from which there was usually a wonderful view of Callow Batch, Dickie suggested that they should rest for a few minutes.

"We've all the afternoon and p'raps all night too for all they care. Serve them right if they have to send out search parties for us," Dickie said as he climbed up and stretched himself on the flat rock at the top. "Plenty of room for you, twin. I can see our pool - 'bout the size of a sixpence. Pity we can't jump right in from here."

Mary climbed up beside him and then reached over to help up Macbeth. She sat beside her brother, clasping her knees.

"The others laugh at me, Dickie, when I say that all these hills feel very ghostly to me. All except Jenny. She believes me. You know what she feels about the Stiperstones, don't you?... Of course you do. You know jolly well. You're just trying to be stuck up and superior... Don't you feel that this mountain is haunted? I bet you do if I do, and I do. There's lots of room for ghosts up here. What about Wild Edric? Peter told us about him. He fought against the Normans after the Battle of Hastings. Don't they teach little boys like you about William the Conqueror? Edric the Forester fought William but in the end he had to give in, and I think that's very sad. Anyway we might see his ghost one night up here. Jenny says he roams about like a big black dog with fiery eyes... Are you listening, twin?"

Dickie, with his hands behind his head, had his eyes closed.

"I can't help it," he muttered. "You just go on and on. O.K. then! We're being haunted. What else is there?"

"There was the brave parson who walked to Ratlinghope from Stretton over the hill one Sunday to take a service, and then started back in a blizzard and got lost. He walked round and round in circles, Dickie, and fell down a ravine into a snowdrift and went blind for a long time and his boots burst."

Dickie was fascinated by the bursting boots and sat up,

"O.K. then. His boots bust. So what? Did he die?"

Mary had to be honest. "Not then he didn't. He was rescued, so p'raps we shouldn't see his ghost up here... Anyway there were the very, very ancient Britons who travelled along the top on the Portway. I'm sure we would see their ghosts... And there was Chief Caradoc who fought against the Roman legions... Trouble with you, Richard Morton, is that you're ignorant."

He did not trouble to answer. Thunder was rolling about the hills again and all the world seemed to be waiting for the storm to break. Dickie hated thunderstorms and was not sure whether Mary knew this. He did not want her to know.

"Let's get on," he suggested. "It will be cooler in the pool and we can shelter from the rain in the water. Ha! Ha!"

They climbed off the rocks and went down the hill into Callow Batch. The silence of the hills closed round them as the thunder died away but the heat was like a damp oven. Macbeth, with lolling tongue, trotted ahead with his tail down. He would rather have been at Witchend.

"I wonder what the others are doing," Dickie said. "Not that we care, but we shall have to make our own plans while we're up here this summer, Mary. They won't notice us."

"Doesn't matter, twin. We always do our own things together. We always find an adventure and I've got a peculiar feeling that we're going to find one soon. We found Amanda Gray by ourselves and she might turn out to be rather peculiar. You never know. She asked a lot of questions and I can't think *why* she's staying here and is so interested in Pontesford Hall... Don't you worry about the others, Dickie. Something always happens for us."

And five minutes later it did. They reached the floor of the valley down which the stream was rushing and turned uphill towards their pool. About fifty yards ahead was a twisted hawthorn tree on which the haws were already changing colour. They knew this tree well, for it had always been a landmark in their explorations, and suddenly three ugly black crows flapped slowly out of the branches.

"See them, Dickie?" Mary whispered dramatically. "Do you know what they mean?"

"They don't *mean* anything. They just heard us coming."

"I told you something was going to happen to us and those three black crows means that we're going to have three surprises. It's no use sniggering, Dickie. I wouldn't be surprised if we're not going to meet three strangers who may mean something jolly important in our lives."

She had hardly finished speaking when a jagged flash of lightning split the sky and with a crash of thunder the storm broke. Macbeth yelped and

Dickie ran for the shelter of the tree. The rain swept like a grey curtain down the valley and for a few seconds the hills were blotted out. There was nothing to see and no sound but the hissing beat of the rain. Then the thunder pealed again, echoing from side to side of the valley, and Mary, as she followed her twin, realized that she was already wet to the skin.

"Not under the tree, Dickie!" she shouted. "Never under a tree. It's not safe in a thunderstorm."

He heard her and fighting back his fear he waited for her by the stream. His hair was plastered over his head and the warm, sweet rain-water trickled into his mouth. She reached him and clutched his arms, laughing with excitement as the thunder rumbled again, but this time it was farther away.

"No good trying to shelter, Dickie. We're wet through anyway. Might as well jump in our pool as we are."

She shook her hair out of her eyes and glanced across the stream to where a steep, narrow ravine, thick with bracken and heather, ran up steeply to the skyline. The rain stopped as suddenly as it had begun and to her astonishment she saw a riderless horse plunging down the hill towards them. It was saddled and she could see the reins loose on its back. The beast's eyes were wild with fear and they could hear its laboured snorting as it rushed recklessly towards them. The twins stood together, too scared and shocked to move.

The terrified animal jumped the stream, saw them, tossed its head and galloped off down Callow Batch.

Dickie said, "You know what's happened, don't you, Mary? That horse threw its rider up on the top and got into a panic when the storm broke. We'd better go and look for somebody who might be hurt. If we can't find anybody then I suppose we ought to go to Hatchholt or Ingles and telephone. Come on. And you as well, Mackie, you miserable little coward. Don't tell him, Mary, but I'm as scared as he is in a storm."

"I know you are but there's no need to mention it, is there. Do you realize, twin, that the poor frightened horse is the first of the three strangers foretold

to me by the crows? Come on. I hope the rider isn't dead or badly hurt."

They waded through the stream and began to force their way up the little ravine through the sodden bracken. Macbeth followed reluctantly. Once they were so breathless that they stopped and looked back into Callow Batch. The runaway horse had disappeared and the hill-top on the opposite side of the valley was hidden by the driving rain. They struggled on up the gully and when they reached the top were surprised to find themselves so high. The rain stopped as they paused to look round, but there was nothing to see except the purple moorland rolling away to the summit at Pole Bank to the west.

"Funny we've never been here before," Dickie said. "Trouble is we don't know how far that horse has come. There's a track here but I don't know which way to go first. Shall I go towards Pole Bank for about ten minutes and you go the other way and we'll meet back here?"

Mary was not keen. Although she had been half-joking about the three black crows she now had the feeling that they were close to trouble. She was sure that the sudden storm had frightened the horse so badly that it had bolted and thrown its rider. And the rider might be lying anywhere in the heather with a broken back. Mary did not want to find someone badly injured when she was by herself.

The thunder was growling away over Shrewsbury many miles to the north but otherwise the stillness was uncanny.

"Let's shout, Dickie," she said suddenly. "Shout together. Loud as we can. Now... HELLO! ANYBODY THERE?... HELLO THERE!"

They were answered. About fifty yards away from behind a clump of heather there came a faint cry for help. As the twins ran forward they saw first an arm raised and then the head of a woman appear for a few seconds. As soon as they reached her they could see that she was badly hurt. She lay on her back with her eyes closed and one foot doubled awkwardly under the other leg. She was well dressed in jodhpurs, a yellow shirt and a tweed jacket. To the twins, in spite of her scarlet mouth and dyed hair, she looked quite old. And they had never seen her before.

Dickie spoke first. "Your horse bolted, didn't he? He rushed down the valley but we couldn't catch him. What can we do? Where are you hurt?"

The woman groaned and opened her eyes.

"I thought I heard someone calling," she whispered. "It was the thunder that frightened him, but I can't keep a horse that is easily scared and throws me, can I?"

They looked at her in surprise, for she did not seem to know what she was saying. Then Mary went down on her knees and pushed back the dank hair from the woman's forehead.

"Try not to worry," she said. "Dickie and me are here now. We'll get help for you but we're a long way from a telephone. Where have you come from and where are you staying? Where are you hurt?"

"My ankle," she gasped. "I think it's broken. Help me to sit up and then I'll tell you what you must do. Are you alone? Or are your parents near?"

Dickie helped his sister to raise her and then produced an already wet and grubby handkerchief and wiped the sweat of pain from her forehead.

"We're alone," he explained. "We're staying at our parents' house at Witchend but we know these hills. The nearest telephone is at Hatchholt or Ingles farm and we could run to either and get help for you. Where do you live?"

"You are good, kind children. I am Mrs. Panthill and I live at Pontesford Hall, Onnybrook, and one of you must run and telephone my husband the Colonel and tell him to come at once and fetch me. I cannot move and am in great pain and am also wet through. Tell him all that. Perhaps the boy had better go at once and the little girl stay with me. The telephone number is Onnybrook 7."

The twins glanced at each other and both knew that neither of them liked Mrs. Panthill very much. Nor did they appreciate the way in which she was giving her orders and calling Mary "little girl". They also knew that they did

not want to be parted and yet would have to be. Anyway one of them would have to stay with Mrs. Panthill, who might become worse and very troublesome or lose consciousness. And Mary, whose prediction about three strangers seemed to be coming true - for the runaway horse was a stranger - was sure she would have to stay. She could run as fast as her twin but Dickie would not be as good with Mrs. Panthill who had chosen just about the loneliest square mile in Shropshire in which to go riding.

"I'll stay, Dickie. Be as quick as you can and go to Hatchholt because that's nearer. If you find any of the others send them up here at once with a flask of hot tea or something. And a jersey for me, 'cos I'm wet through, and a blanket for Mrs. Panthill... Please go now, twin. Mackie will look after me... But be quick"

Dickie turned without a word and disappeared into the ravine up which they had climbed only a few minutes ago; Mary stared after him with a lump in her throat. It was ridiculous to feel so frightened and alone, but she was comforted when Macbeth pushed his shaggy head against her wet legs as if to say, "I didn't fuss to go with Dickie. I knew you wanted me here."

She stooped and rubbed him behind the ears, and then, determined to make the best of a difficult situation, she decided to make Mrs. Panthill like her. And if they talked a lot the time would pass more quickly and perhaps the third stranger would soon appear?

So she blinked back a tear and looked down at her charge. Mrs. Panthill's eye make-up was running down her cheeks and she looked a raddled and miserable old woman in pain. Mary knew that she must try to help her. She tried to stop her teeth chattering and went down on her knees again. What few clothes she was wearing were sticking to her body and she was beginning to feel chilled.

"My name is Mary Morton," she said. "The boy is my twin and although we may seem to you not to be very big we don't like being called little. I'm sure your ankle hurts very much but if you lie down again we could try to move it straight very, very gently because it might be easier if we got your boot off."

This was a good idea but not very practical. Mrs. Panthill was more comfortable lying back on the heather but between them they managed to straighten out her right leg. Although Mary was able to loosen the strap of the riding boot she did not dare to pull the boot over the swollen ankle,

"If we had anything to carry it in I'd bring some cold water from the stream and pour it on your foot," she said. "But what can we do? My shirt is wet through but I could soak it in the cold stream and then wrap it round your boot if that would help. I couldn't get any wetter and I'm wearing bathing things underneath."

Mrs. Panthill had her eyes closed again and just shook her head feebly.

"No, Mary. No. You mustn't do that. Do you think your brother has got to the telephone yet? If he explains himself properly I daresay my husband will send a helicopter. I couldn't bear to be carried over these terrible hills."

Mary wondered for a moment whether she was serious about the helicopter and then to her surprise realized that she was.

"My brother will run as fast as he can until he jolly well drops down absolutely exhausted," she protested. "And he will know what to say to the Colonel whom we know."

Mary knew that a rescue party could hardly be here for another hour because a stretcher would have to be carried from Hatchholt over the hill and then up Callow Batch. She wiped Mrs. Panthill's face again and was frightened by her pallor and her silence. Illness and pain are nearly always frightening and Mary began to wonder whether she was going to find the courage to stay with her. Staying was the hardest part. She wished she was Dickie! It was difficult to know what to do and what to say, but as her teeth began to chatter again it seemed better to go on talking. Mackie came close to her and licked her hand and comforted her.

"Have you had time to see any ghosts yet in Pontesford Hall? I expect there are some. It's very old and very ghostly, I'm told. And I'll tell you another thing, Mrs. Panthill. There are rumours that there's a famous treasure hidden there and of course when you're better, if you and the Colonel feel that

you'd like to look round the Hall for this treasure Dickie and me would like to come and help you. We're rather good at treasure, acksherley, and it would be a great pleasure for us to work with you... And another thing, if you really wanted to please us there are several of us, all friends, who would like to look over the Hall. Would you invite us to do that thing? *Please?*"

Mrs. Panthills eyes were still closed and for one frightening moment Mary wondered whether she had fainted. It would be terrible if she was left alone with an unconscious woman. She stooped over her and whispered.

"Please say something, Mrs. Panthill. Can you hear me? I'm still here looking after you until the rescue party comes."

The injured woman opened her eyes for a few seconds. "I'm feeling very ill, Mary... Don't leave me," and with those words her head lolled to one side and she fainted. Mary had just been going to tell her about the three black crows for want of anything better to say and was now very worried. For one terrible moment she wondered if the woman were dead and then realized that she was breathing. What did you do to people who fainted? Put their head between their knees? But that was impossible because Mrs. Panthill was lying down and try as she would Mary could not even lift her into a sitting position. Throw water in her face? But she could not carry enough water from the stream in her cupped hands.

She jumped up in despair and at that moment Macbeth began to bark as if he could see or scent strangers.

Then, over the brow of a hillock about eighty yards away, came the third of Mary's strangers to match the three black crows - it was a woman with her hair blowing about her face who raised her hands excitedly when she saw her. But she was not a stranger.

"Come quickly," Mary shouted. "Mrs. Panthill is here. She's fainted and I don't know what to do... Oh! It's you, Mrs. Gray. Please hurry. She's broken or sprained her ankle."

Amanda wasted no time and between them they lifted Mrs. Panthill into a sitting position. As they did so she opened her eyes and complained of feeling sick.

"This is a friend of ours called Mrs. Gray," Mary explained. "You'll be all right now. She's older than I am and will be better at doing things for you but I can't think how she got here."

"All I want is for my husband to come," Mrs. Panthill complained peevishly. "Now that there are two of you I'm sure that one of you should run after that little boy and tell him to hurry up."

Mary was near breaking point.

"Just you stop calling my twin a little boy. I told you before that he'll run all the way. I know you're feeling awful but if it hadn't been for us I don't suppose anybody would have found you until you were dead and your bones were bleached in the sun - and p'raps not then."

For the first time Mrs. Panthill showed some animation. "You are an impertinent, rude little girl," she said firmly, but Mary only laughed and asked Mrs. Gray if she had anything to eat or drink in the knapsack on her back and asked what was she doing up here above Callow Batch.

"Yes, Mary. There's some coffee left in my flask. Come over here and help me."

There seemed no reason why Amanda should take Mary out of earshot to unpack her knapsack and then whisper her questions, but she did.

"Did you say that woman is Mrs. Panthill? Are you sure? Of Pontesford Hall? The place we tried to see the other day? How did you find her?"

Mary explained and Amanda, as she poured out all that was left in her flask, said that she had gone off for the day to explore the Long Mynd without a map and had got lost in the storm.

"All the hills and valleys look the same, Mary. I'm wet through and so are you... Now listen carefully. I'll stay and look after Mrs Panthill. I've got a knife and I reckon I could cut her boot off, which will make things easier for her. You're cold and wet but we must give her this coffee, so you'd better run down and find your twin and tell the rescuers to hurry along... I won't leave her. I promise. There's a lot I want to ask her and she'll feel better after some hot coffee. Will you go?"

Mary was sure that she could trust her, but as she scrambled down the ravine into Callow Batch with Macbeth she was very thoughtful. She had never before met anyone like Mrs. Panthill, but it was natural enough, she supposed, for her to go riding on the Mynd. It was also reasonable for Amanda Gray to walk on the mountain. Many holiday-makers did so, but was she really lost? Mary supposed that was possible, but was left with the feeling that there was something rather odd about Amanda. What was it she really wanted to know about Pontesford Hall? If she was just an ordinary tourist from New Zealand why stay for more than a night in Onnybrook of all places? Pontesford Hall might well be worth looking over but there were hundreds more such houses of even greater historical interest to see in other parts of the country.

Amanda Gray was pleasant enough but Mary believed that she had a secret in her life. As soon as she could she wanted to discuss this mystery with Dickie.

It was still hot and stuffy down in the valley and she was too tired to run all the way. The rushing stream, brown and swollen with storm water, now sang a song of its own which was the only sound to break the silence. When she came to where the track divided for Hatchholt, Mary decided to wait there for a quarter of an hour. Dickie had not said that he would come back but she believed he would. If however he had got a message through, the rescue party might come straight up Callow Batch, so it was vital for one of them to guide them up the little ravine to Mrs. Panthill.

So Mary sat down on the bank of the stream and tickled Macbeth behind the ears. The sound of the water was soothing and she realized that her clothes were now dry. Mackie lay blissfully on his back and wagged his tail. A ring ouzel called "pee-u" as he skimmed over the water and Mary

recognized him by the broad white crescent across his black breast. The sun came out and she lay back on the turf and fell asleep.

Ten minutes later she was awakened by Dickie,

"Hi! What's wrong? Why have you left that extraordinary woman? I telephoned from Hatchholt - or Daddy Sterling did - and old Panthill sounded quite excited. They're bringing a stretcher up Callow and have asked Uncle Ingles to come too. I said I'd meet them all here."

"That's why I'm here," Mary said triumphantly as she sat up. "I knew you'd be sure to come back this way," and she told him everything that had happened and of the uneasy feelings she had about Amanda Gray.

"All the same, twin, I was glad to see her, although she looked rather wild and I can't think how she got so lost that she was wandering about up there. There's something odd about those two and I'm sure Amanda wants to find out about something in Pontesford Hall... Did you see David and Peter?"

"They were at Ingles with Jenny and Tom. They'll come with the rescue party I expect - and I think they're coming now. I can hear voices."

So could Macbeth, who sat up, put his head on one side and growled softly as the rescuers came into sight. Peter was not there but David ran forward to meet them, followed by Colonel Panthill.

Mary told her story again and assured the latter that his wife was no worse when she left.

"I don't think she has broken her ankle, sir. I think it's a terrible sprain which is very, very painful. She's had a cup of hot coffee from Amanda's flask and they're waiting for you very urgently. Please go on without waiting for us. We can explain to David exactly where they are and Amanda promised to wait for you,"

The Colonel, who was looking very harassed and upset, remembered to thank them.

"From what I hear you have both been enterprising and sensible. I am grateful. You will hear from me again when we have got Mrs. Panthill home. Now we must press on."

"Your mother is after you two," Mr. Ingles roared as he and Mr. Sterling, carrying the stretcher, joined them. "Back you go to Witchend. Hot baths for you both. No nonsense. No argument. Off you go. Well done both. We're all coming to supper tonight. Tell David exactly where we shall find Mrs. Panthill."

Mr. Sterling gave them a reassuring smile.

"You will find Petronella at Witchend. She started with us and then we saw the frightened horse so she has taken charge of it."

"Must we really go straight back?" Dickie asked his brother before describing the place where Mrs. Panthill lay.

The twins met no one else on the way home to Witchend, where they were given a heroes welcome by their mother and Peter. However, they had no chance of telling their dramatic story once again because, as predicted, Mrs. Morton would not listen to either of them until they had each had a twenty-minute soak in a very hot bath.

When they finally came downstairs, looking clean and polished, tea was waiting, and they began to think they deserved all the special treatment they were being given. Mrs. Morton had not much to say beyond hoping that they would not catch cold. Peter then decided that she would walk up the valley to meet the others.

When she had gone the twins helped their mother to lay an enormous supper, and it was not long before David and Peter were back with the news that Mrs. Panthill, who did not seem to be too bad, was now on the way home in the Colonel's car which he had left at the end of the lane by Ingles. Mr. Sterling was there too but they would all, including Jenny and Tom, be along in about half an hour.

Supper was what Dickie described later as a sumptuous banquet. After rapidly consuming four sausages he asked if it was not time to bring on the dancing girls. Tom was pale but cheerful, and Jenny, who could not be persuaded to leave him, looked prettier than they had ever seen her. Mr. Ingles talked loudly as usual and Mrs. Ingles had no chance to say anything. Mr. Sterling was quiet and courteous and a little bothered by so much noise. Once when Mr. Ingles paused for breath Mary spoke up.

"What happened to Mrs. Gray? Nobody has told us about her and, after all, we were the first to find her. She really belongs to us but we think she's rather peculiar. Did any of you think she was?"

"Certainly," Mr. Sterling agreed. "But many nice people are a trifle eccentric. There are too many people today trying to look alike. Mrs. Gray did not have much to say on the journey down the valley but seems to have some concern for the unfortunate Mrs. Panthill. The Colonel gave her a lift into the village. She looked exhausted, I thought. An unusual woman, as Mary has observed, but fortunate for us all that she lost herself on the mountain this morning and found Mary and Mrs. Panthill."

"I reckon I've had enough of strangers these last few days," Tom said as he looked round slowly at the best friends he was ever likely to have. "All the same I'd be interested to meet this Amanda Gray. Jen hasn't had time to tell me much about her yet. Too busy looking after a sick man. Seems to me that quite a lot has been happening here while I've been away."

The pause that followed was broken by a knock at the door and Macbeth's warning bark. When David opened it, as he had only three nights ago to admit Mr. Ingles, Amanda Gray was standing on the threshold.

"Please may I come in?" she asked nervously. "I know it's an awkward time to come but I was lonely down in the village and I want to ask your help."

Mrs. Morton got up to welcome her, but she would not sit at the table, protesting that she had already eaten. The twins watched her carefully, wondering what she was up to now, but Peter and Jenny were quick to notice that she was shy and nervous. Mrs. Morton sensed it too, but Mrs.

Ingles, who had never met Amanda, looked disapproving and was not at all pleased when nobody introduced her to the stranger.

"Stay and have coffee with us, Mrs. Gray," Mrs. Morton suggested. "You're very welcome. What can we do to help you?"

Amanda was twisting her fingers in her lap but she looked up at the direct question and sighed ruefully before she spoke.

"I know it must all sound very silly to you. Please forgive me if it is, but the truth is that you are the only people here that I know."

"What can we do to help you?" Mrs. Morton repeated as she filled her coffee-cup. "I hope you will think of us as friends. Are you in trouble?"

"Yes, I am in a way. I want to get inside Pontesford Hall. I *must* get inside. It's *very, very* important that I do so as soon as possible... It's something to do with my husband who died six months ago... You must trust and believe me. I must get into the place and look round... And what you all think about the whole set-up is something I want to know very much. Will you please help me? Please."

6. Thursday: Amanda's Story

"I must get into Pontesford Hall to look round. And I want to know very much what you think about the whole set-up. Will you please help me? Please?"

This surprising plea was received in a stunned silence which was eventually broken by Mrs. Morton.

"I'm sure that any of us will help you if we can, Mrs. Gray, but I don't think you really mean that we can do anything to get you inside somebody else's house. Nobody here, so far as I know, has known Colonel Panthill any longer than you have. He's only been here a few weeks and we only arrived at Witchend a few days ago. Mr. Sterling and Mr. Ingles, whom you met this afternoon, live at Onnybrook, but I don't think they know him either... You really mustn't distress yourself. Sit down here by the fire - we always have a wood fire at Witchend in the evenings whatever the time of year - and have some coffee with us... Perhaps later you'll feel like telling us why Pontesford Hall is so important to you."

David kicked the smouldering logs into a blaze. Peter, Tom and Jenny began to clear away, while Mrs. Ingles went into the kitchen to help with the coffee. The two men finding themselves in such an awkward situation, glanced at each other with mutual sympathy, while the twins went over to Amanda who was sitting by the fire nervously twisting her wedding ring round her finger.

"I'm afraid you may not be used to so many people who know each other all being in the same room at the same time," Dickie explained. "We know that we do seem rather a lot and if you could sort of relax it might help. I'm jolly glad you turned up to help Mrs. Panthill and Mary this afternoon."

"Yes, so am I," Mary added politely. "Thank you very much."

Amanda gave them a quick smile and the conversation died again until more coffee arrived and Mr. Sterling persuaded her to tell her story.

"Will you try and tell us really why you have come here, Mrs. Gray? What is your real reason for coming to Onnybrook and why have you come here tonight? What does Pontesford Hall mean to you? You have told these young people that your home is in New Zealand, and you should by now realize that we in this country pride ourselves on treating our guests with courtesy. I am old enough to be your father, my dear, and all of us here are willing to be your friends, but you must tell us the truth, if you please."

Mrs. Gray looked at him fearlessly as the colour flooded into her cheeks.

"You are kind, Mr. Sterling. You are all kind, I am sure, but have no right to say that I shall not tell you the truth. I have nothing to hide, and in a minute I will tell you why I left New Zealand. I came here tonight because I am lonely, unhappy and in need of advice - and also because Mary here invited me to do so this afternoon."

"That's right," Mary agreed. "So I did. I did ask her, Mother. I knew you'd like me to do that because she came to my rescue rather like a miracle. There was Mrs. P. all ghastly and flopped out and suddenly Mrs. Gray popped up out of the heather and came to help me. So I said-----"

"That was very polite of you, Mary," Mrs. Morton said hurriedly. "You've explained how it happened and we really do welcome Mrs. Gray. Will you tell us now why you want to get into Pontesford Hall?"

"Yes, I will, Mrs. Morton. It won't be easy but I'll try, and I'm sure it would be easier if you would all call me Amanda. And please try not to criticize me for what I've done or why I'm doing it because I'm only thinking of my son who was a year old last week. He was only six months when his father died."

"Oh, Amanda," Jenny whispered. "We're all so very sorry. Please let us help you."

"I was born in New Zealand," Amanda went on. "This is my first visit to England although I had heard a lot about your wonderful county of Shropshire. It is true also that I have always been fascinated by your old villages and houses, churches and castles and that sort of thing because my

country is so very new and different. My husband knew about Shropshire although he didn't live round here. My husband, you see, was Miss Pontesford's nephew."

She paused for a moment, looking into the fire, and they all heard the sharp intake of Mr. Sterling's breath as he realized the significance of what she was saying.

"It is difficult for me to explain why Miss Pontesford hated my husband, but she did. Perhaps he was as much to blame as she was, but the truth is that at some time before I met him in New Zealand they quarrelled bitterly... Perhaps Mr. Sterling, who, I think, has lived here longer than any of you, saw Donald at some time because he came once or twice to the Hall?"

"No, my dear," Mr. Sterling said quietly. "None of us here knew what went on at the Hall or who came and went. Miss Pontesford took no part in village life and it is, I believe, many years since any servants were employed there except a housekeeper whom nobody really knew and who left immediately after her death. It is true that some of us heard that there was a nephew or some male relation living abroad but I have never heard that anybody knew his name... Are you sure, Mrs. Gray, that you have to tell us these personal and disturbing details of your past life?"

"I must. I trust you all, as I said. I must trust you else you won't believe me and I must tell you now that my husband, although good and kind to me, was a failure. He was not really qualified for anything and drifted from job to job. I have had to work all through my married life until just before my baby was born. Everybody - except his aunt - liked Donald. He was charming and gay and I shall never, never meet anybody else like him, but he was what the world calls a failure and I think perhaps that is why Miss Pontesford would never do anything to help him."

"How do you know she hated him?" Mrs. Morton asked. "Are you sure of this?"

"Donald told me so during his last illness. He confessed to me then that he had written and told her that we were married but neither of us ever heard from her. He was the last of the Pontesford family, you see - the only son of

your Miss Pontesford's sister who was killed in a car accident with her husband when Donald was eighteen."

"And only half a Pontesford at that," Mr. Sterling observed. "Perhaps he went to see his aunt then and that is when they first quarrelled. Did she, I wonder, know of the birth of your son - and, may we ask, where is he now?"

Amanda sensed that Mr. Sterling was gently critical of her story. She flushed at his last question, and Peter in particular was embarrassed by her father's persistence before they had heard the rest of the sad story.

"You may certainly ask, Mr. Sterling, although I was about to tell you my reasons for coming to England. Martin is with my married sister who lives in Surbiton, and Miss Pontesford knew of his birth although I was not aware of this until after Donald died. He made no will because, poor darling, he had nothing to leave but debts. But he did leave me a letter which is now all I have of him, and something of what he said in that letter is why I risked all my savings to come to England and why I am here now."

She looked round at them almost desperately, aware that she was not really convincing them.

"You don't all believe me," she said wildly. "I can see you don't. I was a fool to tell you. Here you are all sitting cosily together and comfortable in your own little lives and none of you really knows what life is about. You've no idea. I thought you might understand, but whether you do or not you don't care."

Nobody said anything until Mrs. Morton got up from her chair and went over to her.

"That isn't fair, Amanda, and you know it isn't true. I told you you were welcome and I meant it, but you must remember that we don't really know you yet. And not many minutes ago you were begging us to help you to get into somebody else's house to look round, so you mustn't think that because Mr. Sterling asked you one or two questions we don't trust you... Go on

with your story if it is not too personal and then I'm sure we shall understand you better and I hope be able to advise you."

"I'm sorry. I was rude. Please forget what I said. It's only that----- No, I won't say that again, but I do want you all to understand what I feel... Although Donald was ill for three weeks he died suddenly. I think he knew that he wasn't going to get better and the truth is that he wasn't much of a fighter. His letter told me something I never dreamed to be possible. He said that he believes there is a treasure hidden somewhere in Pontesford Hall, and may I please ask you now whether any of you have ever heard that rumour?"

Mr. Sterling smiled.

"Yes, my dear, I have, but you must remember that almost every period house as old as Pontesford Hall is rumoured to have a treasure - and a ghost too. I hope you haven't come all the way from New Zealand on a quest for a mythical treasure."

"But I have, Mr. Sterling. I am desperate for money for my son and I must tell you what my husband said about it. He told me first of the enmity between him and his aunt and that he was sure that she would never do anything for me. He was right too because I wrote at once after his death to tell her and she never answered. He did tell me however that in the letter she wrote to him after our marriage she made it clear that she wasn't going to leave him a penny and that after her death the Hall would be sold to pay her debts. If there was any over it would go to charities. Donald told me in his letter that she was very old and that I should watch the English papers to see when she died. He seemed not only sure that there was a treasure, for reasons I must tell you in a minute, but that if there was it should belong to me and Martin because, although not actually Pontesfords, we're the last of the line. He told me to see a lawyer about this, but I'm not going to do that until I'm surer than I am now that there is something worth finding and fighting for. Anyway, if there is, you will all agree that it's not Colonel Panthill's, won't you?"

"I'm not so sure of that," David said doubtfully. "It's his house, isn't it? Does he know anything about all this, Amanda?"

"I don't know. I can't see why he should. I think he might be reasonable about it all if I could explain what I'm telling you."

"Can't see why he should," Mr. Ingles said, so suddenly and loudly that they all jumped. "I reckon you're going to be disappointed, young woman. If there was anything to be found in the Hall surely the old lady would have dug it up. True that nobody round here knows much about her or what went on up there, but it was said that she was very poor. And even if she did find it there's no reason why we should know."

Then Jenny spoke up.

"I think you're all being rather horrid and unfair to Amanda who has come right across the world to find a treasure for her only son. It's a lovely story really but there isn't much to go on, is there? May I ask a question about your husband, please?"

She nodded and gave Jenny a quick smile,

"It's this. Do you know why he was so sure that there was a treasure? You said just now that you'd tell us something in a minute. Is this something a real clue? Now you've started you must tell all."

"Yes, there is something else. I was just coming to it. It isn't much but I'm sure Donald wouldn't have told me if he hadn't been reasonably sure. He said that on one of the few occasions that he came to Onnybrook he met a man who had once worked at the Hall and who had been dismissed for dishonesty. He said that this man was sure there was a treasure, although the Pontesfords had searched for it in vain. He was certain about this because he had seen them searching and overheard them discussing it, and all this he told to my husband because he liked him. Donald was the sort of man strangers talked to. Really he was, and I know he wouldn't have left this message for me unless he was as certain as he could be that there was something in it... Surely you can see how likely it all is? There might be a treasure worth thousands of pounds hidden there and waiting to be found by a Pontesford. If I could only look over the place I might get an idea. It may seem ridiculous to you all, but I really have got a feeling about it. I asked

Colonel Panthill again this afternoon if I might go and see how his wife was tomorrow if the hospital people let her come home."

"Surely not while you were all helping the injured Mrs. Panthill?" Mrs. Morton said. "What did he say? It doesn't seem to me to have been a very good time to ask him."

"It wasn't. I was a fool but thought I might never have a better chance. I must tell you that he just said that he wasn't going to have any strangers looking round his house... And I am a stranger really. Nobody except all of you knows that, by marriage, I'm the last of the Pontesfords. I can prove that I am."

As she stopped speaking, Peter realized that a sort of antagonism to Amanda Gray was growing in the room. Her story seemed somehow to be incomplete and the silence of the twins suggested their uneasiness. Jenny of course was already won over by the thought of Amanda's baby son but Tom did not seem very interested.

Then Mr. Sterling broke the silence.

"Thank you for telling us all this, Mrs. Gray, but even now you have not made it clear what any of us can do to help you. Have you told the Colonel - or his wife when you were alone with her this afternoon - who you are and why you want to look over his house?"

"I thought I said just now that you are the only people who know. When I get the chance to go and see the Panthills I shall explain of course."

"Obviously you must, but you do not need our help for that. You seem to place great faith in the word of an ex-servant who, on his own admission was discharged for dishonesty, and may well have borne the Pontesfords a grudge. Did your husband tell you this man's name?"

"Yes. It was Stacey and because you've lived in the village a long time I thought some of you might know his name."

This time she really had given them some news and Tom stood up in surprise.

"Of course we know the name. That's my pal's name and his mother lives on the council estate down in the village."

"I know," Amanda admitted. "I tried to get a room with her when I arrived. Somebody gave me her address and I went round to see her, but I didn't say who I was. She told me that her son Ned had the only spare room and came home most weekends and so she couldn't take me. I've been wondering whether she's the widow of the man who told this story to Donald... I'm sure it's true, but when she couldn't have me I didn't think it would be wise to tell her anything yet."

The Lone Piners stared at each other in surprise.

Did she, they wondered, know of the attack on Ned? And what was it she really wanted from them?

7. Friday: The Man With Three Fingers

It was at breakfast next morning at Hatchholt that Jenny broke the news that she was going to Ingles for the day.

"Tom was not feeling very well last night," she explained, "but he did say that he's still got a lot to tell me. You don't mind, do you, Peter? Aunt Betty, as she says I must call her, asked me to go and we haven't made any plans to do anything together, have we? Do you think Tom is going to be all right, Mr. Sterling? And we didn't have time last night before we went to bed to ask you whether you really thought Amanda was telling the truth. I think it's terrible that she has to leave her baby and come up here hunting for treasure which ought to be hers."

She paused for breath as Mr. Sterling put down his cup and smiled at her.

"So many questions, Jenny. Of course Tom will be all right. He's as hard as nails but he had a lucky escape. Don't tell him so but he's a very brave lad. The doctors at the hospital told him to take care and his uncle told me that he's on a week's holiday now. No doubt Petronella and David will find something to do today so it seems a good idea for you to go to Ingles. You also ask about Mrs. Gray and I cannot really answer your question. There is no reason to doubt that she is Donald Gray's widow, and that Gray was the late Miss Pontesford's nephew, but she has not really proved it. I think she was telling the truth about that because when she gave us the name of Stacey she did not necessarily know what we know about Mrs. Stacey and her son Ned, who of course is still in hospital."

"But what about the treasure, Daddy?" Peter asked. "Surely that's true? She would hardly spend her money getting to England and then coming specially up here just on the off-chance? Are you suggesting that she knows more than she has told us? I thought you were rather hard on her last night."

"I'm sorry, my dear. I did not mean to be unfair but it is a curious story, and I would rather that none of you was involved. The Panthills are nothing to do with us, nor are they likely to be, and Mrs. Gray has no right to ask any

of us to help her to get into the Hall. She must tell the Colonel the truth and prove her identity by showing him the letter from her husband. But even then, my dears, you must realize that Colonel Panthill has no way of proving that the letter was actually written by the late Donald Gray."

Jenny looked at him in astonishment.

"Do you mean that it might be a forgery, Mr. Sterling? But that's a terrible thing to say."

"You are a good, unselfish girl, Jenny, but you must not distress yourself too much over this affair. Go down to the farm, help Mrs. Ingles and cheer up Tom... And now please excuse me, and remember what I told you the other day about that agreeable young man."

He went out into the garden and Peter at once asked Jenny what her father had been saying to her about Tom.

"I know he likes him, Jen. Really. But then we all do, and we're very, very sorry about what happened. I'll clear up here and you go straight to Ingles. Later on I'm going to Witchend and maybe we'll look in and see what you're doing... What did Daddy say about Tom?"

Jenny blushed. "He gave me some advice. He was sweet to me and if you don't mind I'd rather not tell even you what he said... And I will go now, Peter. I want to talk to Tom about everything that happened last night. Mr. Ingles took Amanda back to the village and perhaps she told him something we don't know about yet. I still think we should help her, Peter. I can't understand you over this."

"I'm sorry, Jen. I'd like to believe her but something is bothering me about her story. Let's not think about it today. Have a good time and give my love to Tom."

Jenny hurried along the farmtrack.

There was no sign of life when she passed Witchend and she guessed that they were all sleeping late. Before she turned down the lane towards Ingles

she glanced up at the lonely pine tree on the hill. She wondered then, as Peter had told her she had wondered once when she was not happy about David, whether the old Lone Pine Club meant as much to them all as it had done when they were all younger. She remembered too that Mr. Sterling had told her that to be young was not always to be happy. And this she knew now was true, but this morning she was singing as she hurried down the lane. Then, as she paused for breath, she heard a clear, melodious whistle picking up the tune, and she knew it was Tom.

She slowed down because she was suddenly shy and did not want him to see that she had been hurrying. In spite of almost stopping, however, her breath was still coming fast and her heart thumping with excitement as she turned the corner and saw him sitting on the farmyard gate. It would be ridiculous to pretend that she had not seen him, so she smiled and waved and he replied with a grin and changed his whistle to a perfect imitation of the peewit's call.

"Hello, redhead!" he said as he jumped off the gate. "Couldn't you sleep? What's got you up so early? Would you like to see the bruise on my head where that bloke hit me?"

That was not at all what Jenny wanted, but as this was rather an awkward moment she duly inspected a square of plaster over a part of his head that had been shaved.

"I don't believe it's anything at all, Tom," she laughed. "I believe you made it all up, and since you ask me I've come in good time to see if I can help Aunt Betty. Why aren't you working?"

"Got some time off. I'm a sick man. Must be sure not to over-strain myself. Maybe I'll take you out presently. Aunt Betty is in the kitchen if you want to see her."

Jenny went and was pleased to realize that Tom was a little surprised that she did not linger with him.

Mrs. Ingles was a nice, kindly woman who would dearly have loved children of her own. She liked Jenny and was sure that she would make a

good wife for Tom one day. She kissed Jenny, which she did not often do, and said, "Nice to see you every day, love. Tom has been out there waiting for you for half an hour. Mr. Ingles has gone to the village but he'll be back soon."

At that moment Mr. Ingles drove into the farmyard with news that did not please Jenny.

"Seen young Ned Stacey," he shouted. "Just been brought back home in a police car so I had a chance of a word with him. Doesn't look too good but said he'd like to see you, Tom, as soon as you could come down. Hadn't the heart to be mad with him, although I'll have something to say to him when he's better."

"You needn't bother to do that, Uncle," Tom said hotly. "What he did is no business of ours. I needn't have gone with him but I wanted to go and I'm glad I did else he might not be home today. He's not a boy to be ordered about. He's doing a man's job and I'm going down to see him now... Sorry, Jenny, but I must go if he's asked to see me."

Jenny followed him to the gate. He was obviously upset by his uncle's attitude to Ned, but that was not as important to her as his decision to go down to Onnybrook before even asking her if she minded. Jenny had a temper to match her red hair and she was suddenly furious with him, but, just in time, she remembered Mrs. Sterling's wise words.

"All right, Tom," she said quietly. "Let's go then. I've always wanted to meet Ned Stacey and this is as good a chance as any. We were going out for the day so we may as well start now. When we've seen him we'll decide the best thing to do next."

Tom listened in silence and she knew that he was about to say that he wanted to go by himself. She dared not hesitate else all was lost, so she turned to Mr. and Mrs. Ingles and called, "We're going down to see Ned together. Please may we telephone if we decide not to come back for dinner, Aunt Betty? It's just that we haven't decided yet what we're going to do for the rest of the day... 'Bye for the present... Come on, Tom."

As soon as they were out in the lane Tom laughed at her.

"Fair enough, Jen. You come and meet Ned. You won't like him and he'll tell me that I'm baby-snatching if I take you out. You knew what I was thinking, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. You're not exactly ashamed of me but you think I'm not old enough for you just because I've only just left school. You pretend not to know how I feel about us because when you're with Ned he treats you as if you're as old as he is. He swanks about himself to you because he wants you as a friend who thinks he's wonderful. And you're beginning to think that you are wonderful too... And just because I'm not very tall for my age don't you imagine that I don't know what you're thinking half the time. I do know, and anyway if Ned is your friend it's time your two friends met and this is a good chance... And there's no need for you to take my arm or hold my hand, thank you. I can walk very well by myself."

To Tom's credit he accepted all this with good humour and, hands in pockets, he began to whistle so beautifully that Jenny's heart turned over. Secretly Tom was ashamed of the thoughts which were no secret to Jenny and suddenly he was very proud of her. Ned had better like her - or else!

So they walked down the hill to the village side by side and Jenny glowed with satisfaction at the way in which she had handled the situation. She was happy too. Tom was wonderful.

When they reached 7 Oak Tree Way, which was Mrs. Stacey's semi-detached council house, the police car had gone.

"Round the side, Jen," Tom said. "They never use the front door."

Mrs. Stacey opened to them. Jenny had never met her before and did not much like what she saw. She was fat and untidy and her voice was unexpectedly squeaky.

"So it's you, young Tom. You'd better come in and I'll be glad to hear what you got to say about this business. Ned's wild about something to do with the firm. Who's this kid?"

"My friend Jenny Harman," Tom said briefly. "She's come with me to see Ned. How is he?"

"Come in and see for yourself, mate," Ned's voice came from the kitchen. "Bring the girl."

It was a messy kitchen which smelled of stale food. There was a television set on the window-ledge which made the room darker than it need be and the table was covered with unwashed breakfast crockery. It was hot too because there was a fire in the grate. Mrs. Stacey shut the door behind her and leaned against it while Jenny took her first look at the young man who was trying to get Tom away from Ingles - and from her too.

He was sitting back on the most comfortable of the chairs. He was so pale that his thin black moustache looked like a black chalk mark against his sallow skin. There was a bandage round his head and his thick fingers fidgeted with an envelope in his lap. He glanced quickly at Tom and then looked Jenny up and down without a smile.

"Don't bother to ask who I am," she said. "I'm Jenny Harman and I've known Tom a long time. We're friends."

Tom did not disagree but just said:

"Glad you're back again, Ned. They wouldn't let me see you in that hospital. My uncle says the police brought you home. Nice work. Was it a chap called Cantor who saw you? He's an inspector but he looks like a schoolmaster or the sort of chap who might totter round with a butterfly net. He was on the ball, I reckoned. Jen and I met him once. Over Clun way. He's O.K. He came to see me too."

"Well, he's not O.K. with me... Mum! Can't you go and do some shopping or something? I got to talk to Tom privately. Maybe young Jenny would like to go along too?"

Jenny pulled out a chair from the table and sat down with a determined thump.

"I know all about Tom's adventure," she said, "and it's just about the first that we haven't shared together. I'm not going now because we both want to hear what happened to you and it's no use being mad with me. I'm older than I look and Tom wants me to stay."

"That's right, Ned. We came along together. She may as well stay and anyway I don't see why not... You don't look too good and maybe we can do something to help. Pull yourself together, chum. Before we know where we are we'll find that we're in the news."

"Not me they won't," Ned said with sudden defiance. "That old fool Cantor doesn't believe me."

By this time Mrs. Stacey had left the room, and Jenny, to her surprise, realized that for all his rudeness she was sorry for Ned. He looked ill and unhappy and she was fairly sure that he was the sort of boy who was always putting on a show. He was certainly not as confident as he was pretending to be.

"You may as well get used to me, Ned," she smiled. "You two boys keep talking and I'll get those things off the table and clean up a bit, and maybe as you've only just got back from hospital you could do with a cup of tea. Will your mother mind if I make some? Seems to me I've got a couple of heroes to look after."

This proved that Jenny was a clever girl because even Ned smiled at her and muttered, "Fair enough." She cleared the dirty crockery into a grubby little scullery and soon got the kettle boiling. Neither of the boys lowered their voices and she heard all that they said. It was soon obvious that Ned was excited and very highly strung, for no sooner had Tom asked him what Cantor had wanted to know than he began to abuse him.

"Don't you let that chap fool you, Tom. I can tell you he's no good. He's doing all he can to prove me a liar... *I tell you he is*... He doesn't believe that Mr. Dank told me to turn off at The Harrow. What did you tell him about that? Why didn't he see us both together? Why is he picking on me?"

"Of course he isn't picking specially on you," Tom said hotly. "Have a little sense even if you were bashed on the head. I was too, and I can't remember anything much after that except trying to pull myself together in the hospital. I don't even know who took us there, do you?"

"No, I do not and I don't care either. I told Cantor the truth. You know what I said as soon as I picked you up in the car park of that pub? You must remember. Didn't I tell you that George Dank the manager sent for me special and told me I must change the route and turn off to the left at The Harrow. Did I or didn't I?"

"You did, Ned. You told me that your boss told you there was a lot of road repairs at this time of the year and that you must look out for that pub and then turn left for a special diversion he knew about. I told the Inspector that's what you said and what we did. I believe there was a big van without lights in the car park in front of The Harrow too. You saw it, didn't you? I believe you said something about it but we wouldn't be sure that it was the one that followed us, would we? Anyway what's old Cantor worrying about? He's a good bloke. Jenny remembers him. We helped him, with a bit of luck, more than once. You been listening to us, Jen? Cantor is all right, isn't he?"

This was Jenny's moment to appear with the tea and she also went a step farther to win Ned's confidence by making a particularly tactful remark.

"I think Ned and you have been wonderful about all this," she said as she put down the tray. "Really marvellous. Specially Ned. It must take a lot of nerve to drive a big lorry through the dark like that. Here's your tea... We always thought Mr. Cantor was decent enough, Ned. Why don't you like him? He knows what happened and he'll help you I'm sure. The police will catch those bandits and your firm will be so proud of you that they'll give you a better job and a rise... Anyway why do you think Cantor doesn't believe you?"

"O.K., then. I'll tell you two. I didn't want my mother to know yet but I've got the sack with a month's money." He held up the registered envelope with which he had been fidgeting. "This is *it*. Cantor doesn't know yet because the letter was waiting for me and he didn't come into the house. I'm

not so sure that I want him to know although he'll soon find out. *I've been framed, Tom.* That's what it is. It's all been done deliberate. Cantor asked me three or four times what Dank told me to do and this morning he admitted that he'd spoken to Dank on the telephone who said that he hadn't given me any such instructions. He's denied it and he's a liar. Why should I want to go driving round those narrow lanes if he hadn't told me to? There's no sense in it and I'm not going to put up with it. Who do they think I am? Only the other day he told me I'd done well and this was my big chance and now he says he never said any such thing."

Tom was horrified.

"But he doesn't say that in the letter, does he? What reason does he give for sacking you? May I look?"

"Of course you can't. It's private. He says I must be replaced at once because I shan't be fit to drive for a bit and that they're very sorry that I've proved unable to take responsibility. That's the first lie. And, of course, they say that I've broken a rule by giving you a lift and that's true enough. There's going to be trouble over this and you've got to back me up, Tom. I've been accused without any evidence. How will I get another job? I got to give the firm's name as reference and then I'm done for. I'm going to fight this and you've got to help me, Tom."

Jenny started to speak but Tom interrupted her.

"Just a sec, Jen. This is serious. Of course I'll back you up, Ned, but nobody has accused you of anything except giving me a lift. Cantor wouldn't worry about that. He hasn't actually told you that he doesn't believe you, has he? All he said was that Dank says differently. You told me you liked Mr. Dank and you two got on well together. Why should he change suddenly?"

Ned gulped his tea and banged the empty cup down on the table. His voice rose hysterically as he shouted, "How would I know? Surely a fool like you can see that he just wants to get rid of me and I'm going to find out why. I'd go into Shrewsbury now if my head didn't ache so bad. Truth is they turned me out of hospital too soon. Cantor's fault, I wouldn't be surprised.

Probably rang up Dank first, who suggested I was shamming and wasn't to be trusted."

Jenny did not at all like the way this meeting was going. She had always believed that Ned would be no good to Tom and now that she had met him she was convinced. It could be that he had been sent home from hospital too soon for he was certainly over-excited. In his present state he could not be trusted to push a pram let alone drive a lorry. But there was something odd about the way he had been sacked and about the behaviour of his boss.

Jenny wanted to get out of this house as soon as possible and to take Tom with her. She glanced across the table and saw how troubled he was as he watched his friend fingering the envelope, but before either of them could answer Ned heard voices outside and then Mrs. Stacey opened the door.

"Of course, sir, if you insist you're very welcome to come in. What with Ned coming home so unexpected like in a police car and with all the worry I'm afraid I haven't had time to tidy up... Ned dearie, get up and say 'Good morning' to Colonel Panthill who's come along special to see you... The other boy is Tom Ingles, sir. He was in the lorry along with Ned, but I don't reckon he ought to have been. Don't know who the girl is."

Jenny stood up and smiled at the Colonel, rather hoping he would not remember that when they last met she had been trespassing in his grounds. He smiled in return and went over to shake hands with Ned.

"I heard only a few minutes ago that you were home again, my boy, so I thought I'd look in and congratulate you on your courage in putting up such a good show against those bandits the other night. And you too, Ingles. From what I hear you two acted sensible and bravely. I think I can say, even as a newcomer to the village, that the whole community is proud of you both. Excellent show! Really most praiseworthy... And how extraordinary that my wife and I when coming home from a dinner party that very night should have been passing the place where you were attacked and be able to get you both to hospital without delay. Remarkable but pleasant coincidence. Must admit though that neither of you knew much about anything that was going on!"

Both boys were astonished. Neither had seen him before in the village, nor had they been told who had rescued them - only that they had been picked up by a passing motorist.

Tom was the first to recover from his surprise and to thank him, but Ned could not miss another opportunity of telling his hard-luck story.

"Bit of luck for us, sir, that you did come along and thanks very much, but all the same it hasn't turned out well for me. Those so-and-so's the Swift and Sure have sacked me. And what's more I've been framed."

Mrs. Stacey gave a squeak of shocked surprise and sat down heavily. Tom looked horrified, and Jenny, embarrassed for the Colonel, who was behaving so kindly, hurriedly fetched a clean cup and gave him some tea.

"Thank you, my dear. Very civil of you... Did I hear you say you had been framed, my boy?"

"Yes, sir. Sacked by the firm with a month's money, which is bad enough, but the police don't believe me-----"

"Just a minute, Stacey," the Colonel interrupted. "Before you tell me any more do you assure me you have told the police all you know? Everything? All your suspicions?"

"I've told this man Cantor about the directions I was given by the boss before I left - that I must turn off the main road at The Harrow - but I haven't told him I've been sacked. I didn't know then. Letter only came this morning."

"That's as maybe, my boy. Have you told the Inspector, who, incidentally, I know, that you believe you were deliberately sent along that road so that you could be attacked and your lorry robbed? That is what you mean, is it not? I am not sure who you are accusing but you must be very very careful what you are saying."

For a moment Ned looked taken aback.

"All I'm saying is that I was told by Mr. Dank to turn off the road at The Harrow and he has now told the police that he didn't give me those instructions. Or that's what Cantor tells me that he said. Tom here knows that we were attacked five minutes after leaving the main road, and we reckon the furniture van that forced me into the ditch was waiting, without lights, in front of the pub. Cantor hasn't said straight out that he doesn't believe me, but I can see that he's more ready to believe Dank than me. That means he thinks I'm a liar and I'm sacked into the bargain."

The Colonel did not speak for nearly a minute. He stared thoughtfully at Ned and then across at Tom who said:

"I'm sure what Ned says is true, sir. Why should he say anything else? He's been attacked and cracked on the head and lost his job as well. That's not funny - particularly if you put up as good a scrap as Ned did. It's just not fair and I don't blame him for raising a fuss now."

"I can understand your loyalty to your friend, Ingles, and, as I said just now, I admire your courage. Before I tell you something else, however, I am going to give you some advice. You do not have to take it but I think you will be wise to do so and I also believe that Mrs. Stacey will agree with me.

"I suggest that as you have told the Inspector the truth you now try to forget the regrettable affair. We all hope and believe that the bandits will be caught and when they are you will both be called as witnesses. You, Ned, have been given a month's notice because you are not yet fit to drive and you have also broken an important rule by asking your friend to come with you. You knew that was wrong. Whether you were too young and inexperienced to be given this responsibility is no concern of mine, although I'm inclined to think you were. So forget it. Both of you... Don't you agree with me, Mrs. Stacey? Your boy shouldn't be worrying now about what's happened. He's had a tough time but the village is very proud of him."

"I do agree, sir. Indeed I do. I never wanted Ned to take up this lorry driving. It's dangerous and he isn't strong. He never was... All right, Ned dearie, I won't say any more but you've been given good advice and I hope you'll take it."

"I'm going to offer him more than advice," Colonel Panthill went on. "Ned, and young Ingles too, need a week away from this place. They want a holiday so that they can forget an unpleasant experience. I came here to say that if you two boys, and Mrs. Stacey too, like to fix up to go away for a week to the sea I will be responsible for all expenses. It will be a pleasure and nobody need know about it except ourselves. Just talk it over when I've gone and let me know. But don't waste time. Make a decision and get off right away... And another thing, Ned. Don't worry about another job. I have plenty of influence and I'll do all I can to get you fixed up when you return. If you want to earn some money between jobs come and work for me at the Hall. I need a strong chap like you to help me clean the garden up. The place is a wilderness... Now I must go. I'll do all I can to help and shall not tell anyone else of this conversation. Thank you for asking me in, Mrs. Stacey, and thank you for the tea, Miss... Take my advice, lads, and forget this business. Keep away from Shrewsbury, Ned, until other people have forgotten it. There'll be plenty of time to discuss it all when the criminals have been caught. Good day to you."

He shook hands with them all and then, at the door, turned and gave a formal little bow which reminded Jenny of her manners.

"We should have asked after Mrs. Panthill, sir. How is she getting on? We do hope her ankle isn't broken. Is she in hospital?"

He was obviously pleased to be asked and told them her ankle was not fractured but only badly sprained and that she would be home from hospital in a day or two.

When he had gone they all began to speak at once, but eventually Ned wore the others down.

"O.K., then. O.K. He's a good chap. I agree he's been decent, although I'm not going away with a bucket and spade to the seaside at his expense, but come to think of it I don't see why Mum shouldn't go. No, chums! Mister Colonel Panthill is trying to act big in the village. What matters is that I've been sacked unjustly and I'm going to Shrewsbury to see Dank myself and get this cleared up. And if Dank won't do it I'll see the big boss who owns the Swift and Sure. Dank can't know everything that happened. He's trying

to get me out for some reason we don't know about... It's no use whining at me, Mum. I know I'm not fit enough to go but I never will be until I get this cleared up. There's nobody else can do it for me, is there?"

Jenny saw the trap before Tom did but before she could protest Ned tried to get up. His face was very white and beaded with perspiration. He swayed, grabbed at the table and then collapsed with a groan back into his chair. His mother rushed at him and Jenny poured out yet another cup of tea and passed it over. She was sure that Ned was not well enough to go to Shrewsbury and that he had worked himself up into this state of hysteria so that Tom would offer to go for him. She knew too that Tom would agree, if only to prove his loyalty to his pal. Jenny knew just about all there was to know about Tom. So she was not surprised that when Ned had drunk some more tea and his mother had wiped his forehead, Tom stood in front of the fire and made a little speech.

"You'd better stop fussing, Ned. Don't worry about what Colonel Panthill said, but it might be a good idea for you to take your mother away. I'm O.K. now and anyway there's plenty for me to do on the farm. I'll go into Shrewsbury now and see Mr. Dank for you. I'll tell him everything that happened and that I've come because you're not fit enough. I'll explain and back you up and I'll tell you what he says later. Don't worry any more, chum. I'll see to it. Cheerio. You coming too, Jenny?"

She was too amazed to answer him, but as she got up she thanked Mrs. Stacey for having them and while Ned was saying something to Tom she whispered, "I'd have the doctor to come along and see Ned if I were you, Mrs. Stacey."

As soon as they were outside she turned on Tom.

"What did you mean by asking if I'm coming too? What else do you think I'm going to do? Stay in that ghastly, stuffy place? I didn't want to go there and I didn't want to stay and it's spoilt our day together. Ned was determined to make you go and see that man for him and I reckon it was very wrong of him to ask you. What his firm do to him is nothing to do with you. Nothing at all. You don't know if they've got some other reasons for

sacking him. How can you know? He didn't show you the letter. Sometimes, Tom, I could be right furious with you for being so stupid."

"And what are you now?" Tom grinned. "It's no use being mad with me because I've got to do this for Ned. You're the one who ought to have enough sense to see that he's my pal. He's done a lot for me that you don't know about, and anyway you can see he's in a bad state. So cheer up, Jen. You coming in to Shrewsbury with me?"

"You won't be able to leave me behind, Tom. Oh dear! What a fool I am about you!" and she tucked her hand into his arm as they walked to the bus stop together. As usual there were several people waiting for the bus, so it was not until they were together on the back seat of the top deck that Jenny was able to tell Tom something that had been on her mind ever since they had gone into the Stacey's house.

"You seem to have forgotten that Amanda Gray told us last night about a man called Stacey who was sacked from Pontesford Hall but who might know about a secret, hidden treasure. I wanted to ask Mrs. Stacey about that and that was why I was being so nice to her after she'd been so rude to us. Honestly, Tom, a Pontesford treasure for Amanda and her baby is much more important than whether Ned goes back to work in Shrewsbury. Colonel Panthill has promised to get him a job anyway. Can't you see, Tom, how wonderful it would be if we could find a clue to this treasure?"

Tom put his rough hand over hers and squeezed her fingers hard.

"Not to worry about the treasure yet, Jenny. Let's get this other business settled first and then I'll take you to the flicks. No, better still, we'll go and have something to eat after I've telephoned home to say where we are and then I'll go and see this Mr. Dank and get it over. That needn't take long and then we'll go to any picture you want to see and we'll have tea before I take you back to Witchend. We'll have a real time together - just the two of us - soon as I've done this for Ned. Don't be mad with me, Jenny. You know you'd do the same for Peter."

Jenny sighed blissfully although he was holding her fingers so tightly. She just said, "All right, Tom. That will be lovely," and for a second, because

nobody was looking, she leaned her head against his shoulder.

He was still holding her hand when they got off happily at the Shrewsbury bus station, and it was as well perhaps that neither of them knew that Tom's wonderful plans were not going to be carried out as they had hoped.

First Tom telephoned Ingles from a call-box. His aunt answered, and he did not tell her that he was going to the Swift and Sure but that he was taking Jenny to the cinema and they might be late back and nobody was to worry. It was very stuffy in the kiosk because Jenny insisted on coming in with him. His face was streaming when they came out, but Jenny was flushed because she was happy and it was then that she decided to buy Tom a present.

Jenny never had much money because she was not yet earning, but before she left for Hatchholt her father had given her a pound note which was still unbroken in her bag.

A few yards up the street was what is still called a "Gents' Outfitters" and she saw in the window a display of gaily coloured scarves - the sort which can be worn with an open-necked shirt instead of a tie. Tom was wearing just such a shirt of navy blue. Almost before he realized what had happened, Jenny had him in the shop where a youth with long hair assured them these scarves had only just arrived and were the very latest "with it" wear. Tom was both surprised and embarrassed at finding himself in this situation, but Jenny, who was nothing if not single-purposed, did not care. Not only did she help him to choose a bright yellow scarf with blue horseshoes on it, but she made him wear it.

He was perspiring once again when they left the shop, but he did thank her and took her hand again as if he liked it and Jenny began to feel that she could dance on the pavement.

Tom knew instinctively that it would be a mistake to take her to the Four Aces, which was not at all her sort of place, and before long they saw, on a corner of a side street, a clean looking cafe, called simply, "Bert's". There was plenty of room and the girl at the cash desk smiled at them. Jenny felt very grown-up as Tom led her to a vacant table close to another in the

window at which a big man was sitting alone. Jenny ordered fish and chips and Tom sausages, baked beans and mashed potatoes, and when they had finished Jenny asked him again not to go to the Swift and Sure.

"I do know now how you feel about Ned, honestly I do, and I don't care as much as I did, but can't you see that what you say can't make any difference to a big firm like that. There's another thing too. You know now that it was wrong of you to go on the lorry, although that was Ned's fault for asking you. He'd no right to do it and if you hadn't gone you wouldn't have been half killed. Don't go, Tom. Please. We're having such a wonderful day and I'm sure that if you go to this place it won't help either you or Ned."

"Don't start all that over again, Jen," Tom pleaded. "I'm going because I'm as sure as I can be that Ned has been framed. I'm sure now that the attack on us was planned because of that furniture van waiting in the car park of the pub. Our headlights caught it as Ned swung round to the left to turn into that narrow road. You don't understand, Jenny. I'll never forget what happened that night. I can see it clearly now."

She looked at him in surprise as he excitedly raised his voice. And if she had not been watching him so closely she might have noticed that the man at the table behind him was obviously listening intently.

"Honestly, Jenny, I know I'm right. This job was fixed and I'm sure that Ned knew nothing about it. I knew the van was coming up behind us and warned Ned, but he knew too. It wasn't funny, Jen. The driver suddenly switched on his lights full beam and began to overtake and crowd us into the hedge. I heard the van scraping along the side of our lorry, but Ned is an ace driver and kept us on the road although I don't know how he managed it. When the van passed us it pulled across the road, blocking it, and a chap came running back cursing Ned. I saw him in our headlights but wouldn't know his face again because I realize now that he'd got a sort of mask made of a nylon stocking. He pulled Ned out and set about him, while I tried to find the knob to press to start the alarm. I could hear somebody trying to break into the lorry at the back. I can't remember much more, except that I did get the alarm siren going, then the first chap flung something at our windscreen, smashed it, and came for me again. *I can see him in our headlights now, Jen...* Can't you understand that somebody besides Mr.

Dank must have known that Ned had been told to turn down that lane? It's not right for Ned to be sacked because he did what he was told. *I want to know why Cantor doesn't believe Ned.* He would never have turned off at The Harrow if he hadn't been told to do so. Why should he? This man Dank can't hurt me, and if I don't think he's being fair I shall go straight to the police again. Now do you understand, Jen?"

"I think I do, Tom. You're loyal to your friends, aren't you? And you were very brave. Listen to me carefully, Tom, because this may help you. Is there *anything* else you can remember about that man - the man who hit Ned and then smashed your windscreen? The man you saw so clearly in the headlights. Can you remember anything that you can tell Mr. Cantor that would make him believe Ned.

Of course we can't be sure that he doesn't believe him, but is there *anything* unusual about that masked man that you can remember? Try, Tom."

Tom frowned as he stared out of the window.

"There is something, Jen... You're right. It's coming back to me, and it's only because of you that I'm remembering... When the man in the mask and the black leather jacket hit Ned and then came for me he was holding a heavy stick or a bar. I could see his hand. There was something peculiar about that hand... *I know now what it was.* He'd only got three fingers. The middle finger was missing. A sort of stump... I noticed it again when he came for me... *What's the matter, Jen? What's wrong?*"

She was staring over his shoulder and as he watched her face went deathly white.

"The man at the table behind you, Tom," she whispered. "He's only got three fingers on his right hand."

8. Friday: Search the Scriptures

At least half an hour after Jenny had passed Witchend on her way to Ingles farm, Dickie was wakened by the gentle snoring of his brother.

When the Mortons were at Witchend they got up when they liked, provided that they each got their own breakfast. The only other rule was that the first of the young people to look in the kitchen to see what was happening made their mother a cup of tea if she was not yet up.

When Dickie realized that the time was a few minutes to nine he had the feeling that this morning he might well be responsible for both tea and his own breakfast. He dressed quickly and quietly, and had just decided that his stay in the bathroom need not be protracted when somebody banged on the bedroom door.

Mary, of course.

"I thought you'd be up, twin. I absolutely willed you to get up as soon as I did and you have. I've got an idea about our breakfast after we've taken up Mummy's tea... Hurry and come down, Dickie. I'll start the kettle."

Dickie soon joined his sister and asked her cautiously about her idea. "What is it anyway? Not something depressing and idiotic like prunes, I hope."

"It is not. Look in the larder and see how many sausages there are while I take the tea up to Mummy and then I'll tell you."

"About four yards of sausages," he said when she returned. "What's your idea?"

"Have you forgotten that Daddy gave us a portable barbecue as a present because he wasn't coming with us this time? It hasn't been unpacked yet and it's in a cardboard box in the shed. Let's take it up to the Lone Pine camp and try it out. That's why we need plenty of sausages. I told Mummy my idea and she thinks it's as terrific as I do... Mackie likes it too," she added as the little dog jumped up at her.

"That's marvellous," her twin agreed. "If you all think it's marvellous it doesn't matter much what I think, does it? I'll go and fetch the thing while you cut off about a yard of food and pack up some bread and stuff."

The barbecue consisted of a tray of strong wire mesh which was fixed above a metal container standing on four legs. A bag of charcoal was also provided, and after a suspicious examination Dickie decided that, as they had been doing for years, it would be quicker and easier to take up a frying pan and cook their breakfast over the camp-fire set between stones. Then he remembered that their father had given them the barbecue and that Mary wanted to try it, so rather reluctantly he took it back to the house.

Mary was ready with a basket packed with food and a portable transistor, and when Dickie looked at the latter with distaste she defended herself.

"I have decided, twin, that at our age we do not make enough effort to keep in touch with world events. From time to time we should know what's happening around us and attempt to form our own judgments."

"I think you're ravers. Why don't you admit that you're getting so depraved that you want to listen to pop music out of doors at breakfast?"

They crossed the stream and climbed up the track through the bracken towards the lone pine. The gorse was still thick round the clearing at the top of the hill and they pricked their hands and knees as they followed Macbeth into their secret camp.

There was no sign that anybody had been there since their last visit. The short turf was as green and thick with pine cones, and the wind hummed softly in the branches above them. Macbeth sat down and scratched himself behind one ear and the twins put down their burdens and turned together to look down at Witchend. Nothing was moving there. They could see a long way up the grassy track which led to Hatchholt, and when they turned to the east there was a glimpse of the chimneys of Ingles through the trees a quarter of a mile away. Then they looked at each other and smiled and knew what the other was thinking.

"It's a good place," Dickie said. "It's still O.K., but you were thinking that it's smaller than it used to be, weren't you?"

"Yes, I was. It's because we're getting bigger... Get the fire going, Dickie, and we'll do the sausages. I s'pose you must try the barbecue thing but I don't suppose the charcoal will burn unless you start it off with twigs. The kindling tin should be behind the tree and the matches are in the basket... Are you happy to be back again, my darling?"

The last remark was addressed to Macbeth who was sniffing hopefully round the basket. As Mary went down on her knees to fuss him he licked her nose affectionately. Meanwhile Dickie opened the old biscuit tin in which they kept dry twigs and sticks, set up the barbecue grill and tried to get a fire going in the tray. It was not easy and Dickie got rather bad-tempered. Mary agreed that their ordinary camp-fire would be quicker, but unless one of them went back for the frying pan it would be better to persevere. Perseverance was at last rewarded, and while the sausages were frizzling and they burned their fingers, they discussed Amanda Gray's visit to Witchend last night.

"I don't really know how much to believe about a Pontesford treasure, do you Dickie? Did you think any more about it last night? There must be something in it. There's a secret somewhere, and we are, after all, rather good treasure hunters. Do you think she really is a New Zealand widow with a baby which she has left with a sister? Do you believe she already has a clue although she keeps on saying that she's looking for one?"

Dickie was blowing on the glowing charcoal and when he looked up his face was scarlet.

"What I liked was the bit about the Mrs. Stacey who might know something. I don't feel excited yet about this treasure, Mary, but there might come a time soon when we might pay a very private visit - and I mean private - to Mrs. Stacey to see if she's got any clues to sell... Now here's Peter arriving. I bet David gets up now. Wonder what's happened to Jenny? HI THERE, PETER! WE'RE UP HERE."

They stood up and shouted again as Macbeth barked. Peter saw them and waved and as she turned to open the gate David came out of the house to meet her. After a few words they both waved and David shouted, "We're coming up."

"I hope they've both had their breakfast," Dickie said as he sat down again. "For their own sakes, I mean, because I'm going to finish the sausages and you can help me. And don't say anything about Mrs. Stacey... Funny about Jenny. Wonder where she is? With Tom I suppose. And David will take Peter off somewhere, so we'll just keep our plans to ourselves. See what I mean, twin?"

Try as they would, there were still two sausages left when they heard the voices of the others coming up the hill. Mackie knew the voices and stood up with his head on one side, wagging his tail.

"Good morning, both," Dickie greeted them. "How nice of you to call. You are just in time for a sausage each. We can't eat any more. We are gorged."

Peter sat down and fussed Macbeth.

"Clever little pioneers," she said. "Have you seen Jenny? She went off to Ingles hours ago, and she'll be with Tom for the rest of the day I shouldn't be surprised. David is coming back to Hatchholt to swim. What about you two? There's plenty of room in the reservoir."

Mary tried not to show her surprise at this invitation.

"Thank you very much, Peter. We are delighted when somebody thinks about us but we have made other arrangements."

"You wouldn't be planning to see Amanda Gray down in the village, would you?" David suggested. "I should keep off that business she was talking about last night. Nothing to do with us. What's the idea of bringing the transistor? Mother might want it."

"We are keeping in touch with world events," Dickie explained as he switched on, and the calm voice of the announcer held their attention

immediately.

"The police are concerned at the increase of attacks on lorries and vans carrying valuable loads. Three more serious thefts have been reported in the last twenty-four hours and although the methods used are, for obvious reasons, not being disclosed, there is evidence that advance information about future loads and their destination is being passed to a central criminal organization or master-mind. Each raid by the bandits is as perfectly planned and executed as was the Great Train Robbery. It is not surprising that many lorry drivers are demanding armed escorts and the road hauliers themselves are already seeking government action and offering large rewards for information which will lead to the recovery of stolen property. The police ask for the co-operation of the public and within the next few hours will announce some ways in which they can help to crush this outbreak of crime and violence on the Queen's highway..."

David switched off as the announcer proceeded to the next item of news.

"So this is what Tom has got mixed up in. Not so good. I wonder if he's heard this. No wonder old man Cantor was so interested."

"Poor Tom," Peter said. "Never mind about a swim now. Let's go down to Ingles and tell them."

Sensibly enough, Dickie said that he did not see that this would help anybody and that Tom and Jenny would enjoy themselves more if they did not know. Eventually it was agreed to separate and that the twins would go back to Witchend when they were ready and tell their mother that David and Peter would go down to Ingles.

But of course Tom and Jenny were not at the farm and Mr. Ingles, who was having his late breakfast in the kitchen, told them that Ned was now home and that the other two had gone down to see him.

"Not that Jenny wanted to go," Mrs. Ingles said. "And I don't blame her either. I may as well tell you two that we're not too happy about our Tom and young Ned Stacey and Jenny knows it."

Neither felt that they wanted to comment on this, so David told them about the police message. As Peter had expected, Mr. Ingles, who had not heard it, was angry and upset.

"Reckon you two are sensible enough to see what's worrying us," he confided. "Tom means a lot to us. It's as if he was our own. We're getting older and maybe we aren't much company for him, but we got a right to say that we don't think Ned Stacey is any good to Tom. Maybe we're not fair about this, but Ned had no right to take him on the lorry, and now Tom, through no fault of his, has got mixed up with the police. We don't like it and what you just told us means that he will have to appear in court as a witness, and what with the prying and asking personal questions on the television and the newspapers and the like, that makes it worse. It's my belief Tom wants a bit o' sense knocked into him one way or another, and I reckon you two can help to do it. What do you think, my dear?"

"Sometimes," Mrs. Ingles smiled, "I reckon that Jenny Harman has more sense in her pretty little head than Tom and his uncle and aunt all put together. Yes, Alf my dear, Peter and David can help and maybe David most of all. It's about time Tom realized how much he owes to Jenny and that neither of them will ever be happy without each other. You two know what I mean, don't you?"

Peter met the kind eyes of the older woman.

"Yes, we know," she said quietly. "We're lucky."

"So you are," Mr. Ingles roared with all his usual enthusiasm. "So you are, bless you. Have a talk to Tom when you can, David lad, and maybe you could both go down to the village now and see if you can rescue those two from the Staceys afore they get mixed up in something else. What about those rascally twins? They hadn't as much to say for themselves as usual last night."

David told him that he believed they were lusting after the Pontesford treasure, and asked whether Mrs. Gray had said anything else about it when he had taken her back to the village last night.

"Can't make her out," Mr. Ingles admitted. "Seems to me she's got a nerve expecting the Colonel to let her into the Hall and nose round for something that can't be hers anyway. She didn't say anything else last night but she was grateful enough. Not to worry about her. She's probably left by now and gone somewhere else with her crazy ideas."

But she had not. Peter and David met her in the village street just by the road that led to the housing estate. She seemed surprised to see them but as they could hardly avoid her, David stopped.

"Hello, Amanda. We're looking for Tom and Jenny. They're down here somewhere. Have you seen them?"

"No, I haven't. I've just come from Pontesford Hall. I've seen Colonel Panthill. I showed him the letter from my husband to prove who I was and he listened to what I had to say. I told him about my baby and why I've come to England."

They stood before her in silence, for it was difficult to know what to say. If she had gone as far as this she really must believe there was a chance of finding something.

"Now look here, you two," she went on, with quite an edge to her voice, "I realize that you don't really believe my story and are suspicious of me. I s'pose I can hardly blame you, but I like you and I'm going to take you into my confidence just to prove to you that I'm not a liar. I'm on my way now to see Mrs. Stacey and it wouldn't be a bad idea if you'd come with me. The Colonel told me that he'd just been in to see her because your Tom's pal was brought back from hospital this morning. He said he'd heard about this in the village and had called in to see how he was and thank him for his bravery. That old boy isn't so bad really."

"But why should our coming with you to Mrs. Stacey help?" Peter protested. "You mustn't be so sensitive, Amanda. None of us has suggested that you're not telling the truth, have we?"

"You haven't said so but you don't trust me. Only Jenny does. Your father doesn't believe me and neither does the farmer who drove me back here last

night. I'm not sure about Mrs. Morton."

"Never mind about my mother," David said quickly. "I don't mean to be rude, but even if there is a Pontesford treasure it isn't really anything to do with us, although obviously we'd be glad if the finding of it solves some of your worries. We've got some worries too. There's a police call out this morning for people to help stop this hijacking of lorries and we want to get hold of Tom and Jenny. They came down to see Ned and may be there now. Did the Colonel say he'd seen them?"

"No. He didn't say any more about his visit. Now listen. If we all go along together you can both hear what I say to Mrs. Stacey and that should help to prove that I'm not a fake. I'd like you to come, please, but just give me five minutes now to tell you exactly what happened at the Hall."

Before they could protest she took them each by the arm and walked with them a little of the way they had come.

She told them that she had wakened early, and decided that she must stake everything on her ability to convince the Colonel of the truth of her story. She would ask him if they might search the house together even if she could not get a clue from Mrs. Stacey, and then, if they found anything of value, to come to some mutual arrangement for sharing it.

"It took a long time for me to screw up my courage, but the Colonel must have been with Mrs. Stacey when I rang the bell at the Hall. Nobody answered but I supposed Mrs. Panthill was still in hospital. There was a van in the courtyard at the side of the house and I thought I could hear hammering. There was a pile of rubbish in a corner, so he's obviously still got some builders at work, but I didn't see anyone. Anyway I'd almost given up hope and my courage had nearly gone when I saw him coming up the drive, and he wasn't at all pleased to see me. I don't mind telling you that for a few moments I was dead scared. It wasn't so much what he said but the way he looked at me... I can't remember how I got him to listen, but I think it was when I told him that my husband was half a Pontesford and that because he was dead, and had left me nothing but debts, I'd come to see him and find out about Mrs. Stacey. He asked me inside then and listened politely. I showed him my husband's letter to prove my identity, and then he

asked me whether I'd seen Mrs. Stacey yet and I think he was pleased that I'd come to him first. It was then that he told me about Ned, and eventually he said to come and see him again if I can find out anything from Mrs. Stacey. And that's where I'm going now. He didn't say yes or no when I suggested that perhaps I could have a share of the treasure if there is one. But then I could hardly expect him to do so right off, could I?"

David agreed. "I suppose you've made some progress if he didn't kick you out. You really do feel sure about your chances, don't you, Amanda?"

"Yes, I do," she said eagerly. "You see, you didn't know my husband. I suppose he had more faults than most, but I'm absolutely certain that he wouldn't have left this message for me if he hadn't believed there was some truth in the rumour. So you see now, David and Peter, that my best hope is to get something from Mrs. Stacey. If she really knows nothing I shan't know how to persuade the Colonel to search the Hall."

"He may be doing it now for all you know," David said shrewdly. "None of us knows much about him except that he's behaving very decently since he came here. I must say I wouldn't be very keen on having my new home turned inside out in the hope of finding a treasure that probably doesn't exist."

"I'm beginning to think it may exist," Peter laughed. "I'm on Amanda's side. Let's all go and see Mrs. Stacey, and if Tom and Jenny are there it will be quite a party. I've never seen Mrs. Stacey. What's she like?"

"Unattractive. Big and floppy with a squeaky voice. Untidy."

"What a prospect!" David groaned. "Let's go and get it over."

Amanda remembered the number of the house, and when, after knocking several times, Mrs. Stacey opened the door, David and Peter realized that the description they had just been given of her was accurate. She looked at them with hostility as Amanda introduced herself by reminding her that she had called the other day to ask for accommodation.

"Can't see nobody now," Mrs. Stacey squeaked. "Can't be bothered with any more visitors. Doctor's just been to see my boy and sent him to bed. We can't be worried any more today... Go away. All of you."

"We're sorry to hear about your son, Mrs. Stacey," Peter said quickly. "Everybody round here knows how brave he's been, but we're friends of Tom Ingles and Jenny Harman who came down to see him this morning. Have they been gone long?"

"Gone gallivanting off to Shrewsbury or some place," the woman muttered suspiciously. "I can't see nobody else now."

But Amanda persevered and eventually won her over by asking her if she ever knew her husband when he was a young man.

"He's dead now, you see, Mrs. Stacey, and I've come over to England with my baby son and I expect I shall have to find a job soon. I've come to see you because my husband mentions your name in a letter he wrote to me just before he died. Surely you or your late husband remember Donald Gray who was Miss Pontesford's only nephew? David and Petronella here are helping me to find out things about him because, you see, I've never been to England before and Donald so often spoke to me about Onnybrook I just had to come and see it."

"Did he really then? If I could get out of Onnybrook I'd never want to see the place again. I 'ates it. So you're the foreign girl what married Donald Gray, but there's nothing we can do for each other so you'd better be going."

"But I believe there is a way we can help each other," Amanda said quickly. "You can tell me something I badly want to know. Something that might be worth so much to me that I might be able to help you get out of Onnybrook. Let's go in and talk things over like old friends."

She let them in and they sat together in the squalid kitchen and Amanda told her story again. David and Peter were getting weary of Amanda's past, but they did notice that Mrs. Stacey was listening attentively, although when she came to the all-important treasure she actually laughed.

"You don't want to take no notice of that old story, dearie. Folk round here was talking about that when I was a kid. Or when I was growing up anyway."

"But that's what I mean, Mrs. Stacey," Amanda pleaded. "Now that you can remember as much as that I believe it's true. You see my husband Donald knew it and he told me that he was told about it by a man called Stacey who had worked at the Hall for a while. That man must have been your husband, surely?"

"Ay. So it was. George got fed up with that old baggage up at the Hall and cleared out. She wanted him back but he wouldn't go. She wanted me to work for her but I wouldn't be seen in the place. She was a wicked woman that one, and I reckon if there was money or jewels hidden up there she would have found it."

"Not if she hadn't got a clue," David said, and it was obvious that he was at last getting interested in the possibility of a treasure. "Of course if your husband knew anything definite you would have known all about it. Do you remember him talking about a treasure, Mrs. Stacey?"

"He talked about it all right, but George was always talking. He was the sort o' chap who was always hoping something good would turn up but I never believed the story. Maybe he didn't either in the end. He never left me no message nor no letter like your Donald did, dearie... But I do remember your husband, honest I do. I remember him yarning away to George sometimes, but you're wasting your time, Mrs. Gray. There ain't anything to find up there."

"Wait, Mrs. Stacey. Let me think," Amanda said excitedly. "Was your husband employed always by Miss Pontesford and - forgive me for being blunt - did she discharge him because he was dishonest?"

"He wasn't sacked," Mrs. Stacey said indignantly. "I told you. He got fed up and walked out. He wasn't at the Hall when I married him. He was a gardener. It was his old dad who was butler at the Hall and was sacked."

Amanda smiled triumphantly at David and Peter.

"Now it's beginning to make sense, isn't it? Donald must have got mixed up or forgotten which Stacey worked for a long time at the Hall and somehow or other had got a clue... Now, Mrs. Stacey, what I'm going to say is terribly, terribly important and might mean a lot to us both. I believe it was your father-in-law, not your husband who had the clue, and what we've got to find out is whether he passed it on. Don't you all see that if he was butler at the Hall he would have plenty of opportunities for snooping around, wouldn't he? And I suppose nobody knows exactly why he was sacked."

By now Peter had forgotten about Tom and Jenny. The treasure hunt was on!

"I see what you mean, Amanda," she interrupted. "May I ask Mrs. Stacey whether her father-in-law the butler ever left anything to her husband when he died? And did your husband leave you a message or anything that might be a clue, Mrs. Stacey?"

"Only debts, miss. Just debts and nothing to pay them with. Neither did the old man. He was a selfish old devil and I reckon I would have known if he'd left anything to George."

"Are you sure?" Amanda begged. "Any letters or old books? Do try to remember. Please."

For the first time a gleam of intelligence flickered over Mrs. Stacey's plump features.

"Just suppose I could remember something, dearie. If I could, I reckon you wouldn't mind giving me a little present, would you?"

"I'll buy trustworthy information. What have you remembered?"

"There's an old bible upstairs. I'm not much of a one for religion, and neither was George," she admitted. "And neither was his old dad for that matter, although the bible has got his name in it. 'Benjamin Stacey', he wrote in the front of the book. I'd have taken it in to Shrewsbury to sell months ago, but it's that heavy to carry. I wouldn't be surprised if it's not worth quite a lot o' money, dearie."

"Perhaps it is, Mrs. Stacey, and it's true that you could only find out by taking it to a shop, but I would like to see it. I'm interested in old things like that. If this bible is the only thing passed down from your father-in-law, who worked most of his life at the Hall, it's worth looking at. May we see it, please?"

Mrs. Stacey looked at them doubtfully for a moment and then heaved her great bulk out of her chair.

As soon as the woman left the room Amanda turned excitedly to David and Peter.

"You see, there really is something. I was so sure that Donald had a reason for what he said. There are often messages and details of the family written in old bibles."

Peter whispered:

"Surely if there's a clue in the Bible her husband would have found it?"

"Not if he was as stupid as she seems to be." David said grimly. "Don't be too eager to buy it, Amanda, and don't give her too much."

"I haven't got much, but I'm glad you're both here to stop me from being too silly... Here she comes. Keep your fingers crossed."

Mrs. Stacey waddled in, breathing heavily, and put the bible on the table. It was a big, thick book bound in black leather which was marked with patches of mildew. It also had a brass clasp which Amanda unclipped with shaking fingers as Peter and David came round the table and looked over her shoulder,

"It's got the old rascal's name in the front," Mrs. Stacey panted. "You can look. There's nothing else except that some of the bits are marked. I reckon somebody gave it to old Benjamin - or he pinched it! There was nothing religious about him as I told you."

"P'raps one of the Pontesfords gave it to him when he worked for them," Peter suggested. "But from what Amanda says I shouldn't think they had much use for a bible. There you are. There's his name. It's clear enough. And the date is 1899."

The ink with which Benjamin Stacey's name had been written nearly seventy years ago was faded now to a light brown, but the signature was clear enough on the stained paper. Below it, in a different coloured ink, were written the words "JOHN V-39."

"Difficult to say whether that was written by Benjamin or not," David said, trying not to show that he was as excited as Peter. "Look, Amanda. A page in front of this - don't they call it a fly-leaf? - has been cut out, so it's possible the bible belonged to someone else before it came to the Pontesford butler who removed the name of the original owner for a reason we shall never know."

"Don't worry about that now," Peter begged. "Look up John V."

As Amanda turned the pages they noticed that many of them were marked with underlinings of certain texts that presumably the reader wanted to remember. Verse 39 of the fifth chapter of St. John's gospel had three words underlined in the same pale violet ink used for the references in the front of the bible. The words were: *Search the scriptures*.

"Well, that's a big job," Amanda remarked. "Have we got to read the bible from beginning to end. Never mind. This book will be a splendid souvenir of my visit to Onnybrook. Will you sell it to me for five pounds, Mrs. Stacey. I know you don't believe in a Pontesford treasure, but I'd like the bible all the same."

"You may have it, dearie. It makes me laugh to think of old Benjamin or my George sitting down and searching the scriptures as it says there. Give me the money, but don't say nothing to nobody about it. Ned will be yelling for his dinner soon and I don't want a fuss about you being here."

Amanda handed over the money and as David fastened the clasp and lifted the bible she said, "Thank you for your help, Mrs. Stacey. If anything in this

bible helps me to find a treasure, and I get a share of it, I promise I'll give you something. Good-bye."

"Thank you all the same, dearie, but I'll be surprised if I see you again," was all Mrs. Stacey said as she closed the door.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" Amanda said as they walked up the road. "Thank you for coming with me."

"I don't," David said. "I've been suspicious of the story until now but I think this bible is worth looking at. Come up to Witchend with us and have something to eat and we'll search the scriptures together. We'll call at Ingles on the way and tell them that Tom and Jenny have gone to Shrewsbury. I think my mother was going there in the car to do some shopping. I don't know where the twins are. I think they also have designs on Mrs. Stacey and let's hope they're not on their way there now. If they're at home they'll be thrilled by the bible. Let's go."

Peter ran into Ingles to give them news of Tom and heard that he had just telephoned his aunt from Shrewsbury to tell her that he was taking Jenny to the cinema, so that was all right. The twins were at Witchend and very surprised to see them - especially Amanda. They assured David that they had spent an innocent morning tidying up the camp and then going up to Hatchholt to see Mr. Sterling and have a swim.

"Acksherley, Peter's father is much cheered by our presence," Mary explained to Amanda. "We are utterly devoted to him. As our mother has gone shopping we are having a snack here and you are welcome to share it if there is enough."

"Which I doubt," her twin added gloomily. "Why have you brought that giant bible with you and what have you all been doing?"

David told them while they enjoyed corned beef and bread and cheese. They all ate too fast in their anxiety to search the bible, but Peter insisted on making coffee before they cleared the table and set to work.

First they separated every page to make sure that none was stuck together hiding a thin sheet of paper with directions for finding a secret chamber. There was no such obvious clue, but they were surprised to see how many texts were marked. It was Peter's idea that they should next list the subjects of such texts if they suggested anything valuable.

"I mean jewels, or money, or gold. I'm sure there are lists of all sorts of precious things which King Solomon used to build a temple. And didn't the Queen of Sheba bring him sacks of treasure?"

"Lucky old him," Dickie remarked irreverently. "But I see what you mean although I don't know how it will help us."

It did not help and it took a long time, and they were depressed and exhausted and had covered several sheets of paper with scribbled notes when they had been right through the bible.

"This is ridiculous," David groaned. "None of it makes sense and we shall go mad if we go on like this. I'm beginning to think that Mrs. Stacey has got the best of the bargain. Sorry to be depressing, Amanda, but I haven't an idea what to do next, have you?"

Amanda leaned back in her chair and pushed her hair from her forehead as Mary pulled the bible in front of her.

"You all go on talking," she said. "I've got a silly idea. Come over here, Dickie, and tell me if you see what I see."

The others did not take much notice of the twins, but Peter had long ago realized that they were both far more intelligent than they sometimes seemed to be. She had a great and growing affection for them both, and Mary especially would always be very close. In an odd way, as David became more important to her so did the twins. Amanda and David were talking together as Peter's thoughts wandered into the future and suddenly Mary looked up. Her eyes were bright with excitement as she smiled across the table at her.

"Peter, darling. I think we've got something. Listen, everybody, and don't be mad if we've been silly. Somebody get a clean bit of paper and write down the texts I read out. Didn't any of you notice that some of the underlining is in pale purple ink, the same colour as the chapter and verse in St. John under Benjamin's name in the front? Dickie thinks that shows that whoever did the 'Search the scriptures' thing then marked a lot of texts at the same time... See what we mean?"

"See what you mean?" David laughed as he got up and ruffled her hair affectionately. "We do see that you're uncommonly bright today - and Dickie too of course. A prize set of twins. Now we really might be on to something. Mary means that Benjamin didn't necessarily exhort us to search all the scriptures. We can't tell from the handwriting but the chap who had a purple-ink bottle probably marked all his at the same time, and his choice might be the clue we're looking for. Don't you agree that some people have intelligent twins in this country, Amanda?"

"Of course I do. And I remember now that one of yours said they were good at treasure hunting. Is that all you've discovered so far, Mary?"

"Acksherley no, Amanda. I haven't been all through the bible again but I think that all the purple texts are in the Psalms. Shall I read them out now from the beginning?"

This is what David wrote down from Mary's dictation:

Psalm 13 verse 3 Consider and hear me, O Lord my God.

Psalm 25 verse 1 Unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.

Psalm 31 verse 4 Pull me out of the net that they have laid privily for me;

Psalm 59 verse 17 Unto thee, O my strength, will I sing;

Psalm 71 verse 18 Now also, when I am old and grey-headed, O God, forsake me not.

Psalm 82 verse 3 Defend the poor and fatherless;

Psalm 100 verse 4 Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise;

Psalm 119 verse 29 Remove from me the way of lying;

Psalm 119 verse 17 Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe;

Psalm 142 verse 6 Attend unto my cry; for I am brought very low.

Psalm 147 verse 8 Who covereth the heaven with clouds
Psalm 148 verse 11 Kings of the earth, and all people;

"That's all I can find," Mary said as she closed the bible. "And now that I've read them out they don't seem to make sense, do they? Let's see how they look when they're written down, David."

They crowded round him but had to admit after a quarter of an hour's argument that they didn't mean much. It was obvious that Amanda was more than disappointed. She didn't say much but Peter saw the tears in her eyes as they puzzled in vain over the extraordinary collection of unconnected and sometimes unfinished sentences.

Nobody laughed when Dickie put his head in his hands like an old man and in a quavering voice quoted from Psalm 71.

"Not funny. Pipe down," David snapped. "It's just because they don't seem to have any meaning that I'm sure they must. Perhaps it's something to do with the arrangement of the letters. A sort of cipher. The first letter of the first text, the second letter of the second word of the next or something like that. Let's try."

Peter, leaning on his shoulder with her hair tickling his cheek, suddenly saw it.

"Try the first letter of each sentence," she shouted. "That's it, surely. The first three letters spell cup."

And so they solved the problem although the answer did not make much sense, even after they had divided it into three words:

CUP UNDER HAWK

"I don't see how a cup could be a treasure," Amanda said, "but I do really believe we're on the trail now. I'll tell you why. A sparrowhawk is the crest of the Pontesfords, I remember Donald telling me... Mary darling, you're a clever, clever girl and thank you all for helping me. But what about a cup? What does that mean?"

"I could guess," Peter hazarded. "A cup might mean a chalice - a church chalice used for Holy Communion. Some of the old ones could be very, very valuable. Sometimes they were made of gold and jewels, I believe. Suppose a Pontesford of long ago gave one to the church and suppose it was taken out of the church in the Civil War to keep it safe from Cromwell's Roundheads and hidden in the Hall. We could ask the Vicar, I suppose. He should know from the church records whether a valuable chalice ever disappeared."

They all looked at her admiringly as Amanda surprisingly leaned forward and kissed her. Then, before anyone could speak, they heard the sound of a car, the screech of tyres harshly braked and running footsteps. David, as usual, was first at the door, and there, once again, was Mr. Ingles.

"Your mother not back yet, lad? I've got bad news."

David shook his head. "She's in Shrewsbury. What's wrong? Has anything happened to her?"

They crowded round him as he stepped into the room.

"No, David. Not your mother. It's Tom. Shrewsbury police have just telephoned. They say that young Jenny is at the police station. She wouldn't speak to me but she's got some story about Tom. Say's he's disappeared and she thinks he's been kidnapped after following a man with three fingers who attacked Ned and him in the lorry the other night. Police say they're searching for Tom now but Jenny refuses to come home until they find him."

9. Friday: Jenny and Tom

Tom put down his cup and stared at Jenny's stricken face. "What did you say?" he whispered.

"The man at the table behind you," she said under her breath. "He's only got three fingers. I'm sure, Tom. He's put his hand under the table now."

Tom kept his head.

"Try not to look scared. Did he hear me?"

"I don't think so. What shall we do?"

"Pretend he's not there. There's only the two of us, see? You're my girl. Behave as if you are, but don't deliberately not look at him. Play up, redhead, and let me think."

He gave her a smile that made her catch her breath and then stretched his hand across the table and closed it over her fingers. Her courage came back. She laughed at him and then casually looked again over his shoulder. The man was now lighting a cigarette and she could see his maimed hand clearly. Then he pushed aside his empty plate and pulled a cup of tea towards him while looking out of the window. She saw his face clearly now and, remembering that Tom had never seen it because the man had been masked, she watched him carefully.

It was a coarse, brutal face with a dark, unshaven chin. His untidy hair was long and greasy and the nose small. He was wearing a black leather jacket, although the cafe was hot, and an open-necked checked shirt. Then suddenly he turned, as if he knew that she was watching him, and met her eyes. His were cold and blue and bored into hers so that she instinctively shivered with fright. Tom saw her expression change and squeezed her fingers again. Then he lifted her hand and held it for a moment against his cheek, and said loudly enough to be heard:

"Let's go, sweetheart. Big picture was half past two and we don't want to miss anything," and then so quietly that she could barely hear, "I must get out of here before he recognizes me and I've got to be quick. You pay the bill at the desk. Got enough money?"

Had he forgotten that she had bought him the scarf he was now wearing? She shook her head.

"Sorry, Jen," he whispered as he released her hand and put his own in his pocket. "I'll give you a note as we go to the door. I shan't wait here for you. Don't worry. Make an excuse to the girl. I'll be somewhere up the street - in a shop doorway if I can. We've got to follow that chap. Can you do it, Jen?"

She laughed up into his face just as if she did not know that the man with three fingers was a criminal and might have killed both Tom and Ned.

"Oh, Tom!" she said, loudly enough to be heard at the next table. "I don't really care what we do but I'd love to go to the flicks with you," and she got up and took his arm.

They managed very well. As they strolled over to the cash desk Tom slipped a pound note into her hand and there was no reason for him to look back at his enemy. After a word with the girl at the desk that made her smile, he left Jenny to pay the bill and was walking unconcernedly up the street almost before the door had closed behind him.

"My boy friend is absolutely hopeless," Jenny explained. "He takes me out and hasn't brought enough money to pay and to take me to the flicks as well. He's gone to borrow some from a pal. Aren't some boys careless?... Cheerio."

She turned, naturally enough, at the door and glanced back into the cafe. The man with three fingers was picking his teeth and did not even look up.

There was no sign of Tom outside and there were quite a few people in the street. She had a moment of panic, wondering whether the man with three fingers was already paying his bill and in a moment would come out and grab her. From what Tom had said, it was obvious that he was ruthless and

would stick at nothing to get his own way, and it was still just possible that he had overheard what Tom had said about him. Jenny knew that the police were looking for this man and it seemed that Tom was the only person who would be able to identify him. As far as they knew, Ned would not be able to do so. Then she remembered that Tom had said they must follow the man and she certainly was not in favour of that idea.

She looked back at Bert's cafe but Three Fingers was not in sight, so she hurried up the street looking for Tom. It was too bad of him not to be waiting for her because it was difficult to look in every shop doorway on each side of the road. Then she had a terrifying thought. Suppose that Three Fingers had arranged for another man to watch Bert's and look out for them? Suppose he had already recognized Tom before they went into the cafe and followed them? Suppose that they had fallen into a trap and that the accomplice had waited outside Bert's and that Tom was now being followed or had already been captured? Suppose she was now a suspect and being watched?

While she was scaring herself with these thoughts her arm was suddenly gripped and she was dragged into the doorway of a sweet shop. She opened her mouth to scream for help and then realized that Tom had his arms round her and was hugging her so tightly that for a moment or two she had not enough breath to protest even had she wanted to.

"Little idiot," he laughed. "You weren't even looking for me. Listen, Jen, and don't argue. There's no time to waste... Three Fingers knows me but not you, so it doesn't matter now whether he sees you. Can you watch the cafe from here if you look down the street?... Good. Keep an eye on it while I tell you what we're going to do... When he comes out I'm going to follow him to see where he goes. Soon as I've gone you must find a policeman and ask to be taken to Inspector Cantor. If you can't find a copper go to the police station and ask for him, and if you see him yourself tell him what has happened and what Three Fingers looks like - everything you can remember about him and what he was wearing. Wait for me at the police station. I'll meet you there. It all depends on you, Jen. You'll do that, won't you?"

"No, Tom. No. You're not to follow him. You'd be crazy to do that. Can't you see that he may have heard everything you said and that we're being

watched now? I don't mind going to the police but we'll go together. You're not to go off by yourself after that terrible man. You haven't seen him but I have. He's a sort of *monster*, Tom."

He told her not to be silly and to her dismay she realized that he was not only determined but also eager and excited to go off on his own. She changed her tactics and reminded him that he had promised Ned to go and see the manager of the Swift and Sure. His answer was that there was plenty of time for that later in the afternoon when he had discovered where Three Fingers lived or worked.

Then she played her last card.

"Anyway, Tom, you ought to see that I'm afraid to be left alone. Honestly, I am. It's not fair to leave me like this. Leave that man alone and let's go to the flicks like you promised. I'm scared, Tom."

He put his hands on her shoulders and made her look at him. Then he laughed at her.

"Silly little girl. Redheads are never scared. Look now and tell me whether you can see him."

She looked down the street and there was Three Fingers lighting another cigarette just outside the cafe.

"Is that Three Fingers?" he demanded. "He's wearing a black leather coat. Is that him, Jen?"

She nodded miserably and tried to stifle a sob. Suddenly he held her close to him with one strong arm and lifted her chin with his other hand.

"Do as I say, Jenny. You're my girl, you know," and he stooped and kissed her so tenderly that for the first time she was sure that he really cared. She gasped and clutched at him but he had gone - crossing the street and then hurrying down the opposite pavement after the man with three fingers.

Very well then. She must do as he said. She turned up the street and began an absurd hunt for a policeman. Absurd because she could not find one. The pavements were more crowded now, and although she had been to Shrewsbury before, so many of the old houses and shops had been knocked down that she could not remember exactly where she was. It was all rather like a nightmare because in spite of that kiss - or perhaps because of it - she had the most awful forebodings about Tom.

She ran blindly up one of the main shopping streets, trying to remember where the police station was and realizing that she must stop some stranger and ask the way.

"Please God help me to find a policeman," she prayed, as if she were a little girl again. "Let me help Tom. You know I must help Tom."

And then her prayers were answered unexpectedly as they often are. She bumped into a slim woman in a tweed suit coming out of a draper's shop and as she gasped, "I'm so sorry," she realized that it was Mrs. Morton.

"Jenny, darling! What are you doing here and what's wrong? Tell me at once. What's happened?"

So with tears of relief streaming down her face Jenny tried to explain why she must find Inspector Cantor at once.

"Very well, Jenny. Go on talking as we walk down to the car park. I'll take you to the police. Just calm down, darling. I'll help you, but first of all do you know where Tom has gone?"

Jenny was still too upset to tell her very coherently and had not really finished when Mrs. Morton drove up to the police station. After a short wait they were in Inspector Cantor's room and if he was surprised he did not show it, for he looked as benign as usual as he greeted them. He remembered Jenny but asked Mrs. Morton first why they had come. Before she could even try to explain, Jenny broke in.

"It's about Tom Ingles. The man who attacked him and Ned Stacey the other night has only got three fingers on one hand. Tom saw him in a cafe and

he's now following him. He told me to come and tell you."

"What cafe, Jenny? Here, in Shrewsbury? Tell me quickly."

Jenny recovered her confidence and with the comfort of Mrs. Morton beside her and the detective's patience she soon told him what he wanted to know. When he had telephoned for a police car he said:

"I'm going to take Jenny with me to Bert's cafe, Mrs. Morton, and we'll put out a call for Tom Ingles. We'll find him if he doesn't come back here first. Would you care to wait here, or come back say in an hour's time?"

Mrs. Morton explained that she would prefer to finish her shopping and come back. And then to Jenny she said, "If you and Tom are here first please wait for me and I'll drive you home. And I'm sure the Inspector will leave a message for me if he has any news."

After Mrs. Morton had driven off, Jenny had her first ride in a police patrol car. They were soon at Bert's cafe which was now nearly empty, and Cantor took Jenny in with him. The nice girl at the cash desk had gone, and a thin man, wearing steel-rimmed glasses, was in her place and counting the money in the till.

The Inspector introduced himself and asked if he was the proprietor, and when the man admitted that he was he asked him if he remembered Jenny, who pointed out the table she had shared with Tom.

"That's right," he said. "I saw her with a young chap. What's wrong, anyway? We don't like coppers in here. They disturb the customers."

"Lucky for you there aren't many to disturb. There was a big man in a black leather coat sitting at the table in the window behind those two kids. This chap has only got three fingers on his right hand. We want to have a word with him because we believe he can help us in an important enquiry. Do you remember him and do you know his name?"

"Sorry, mate, but I can't remember everyone who comes in here. Place was full today, but I noticed this redhead and the boy because there was a lot of

fuss about who paid the bill and she did... Shouldn't take too much notice of what she says. Excitable, I reckon... And, come to think of it, I don't believe there was anybody at that other table. It generally goes quick but not today."

"You know that's not true," Jenny protested. "The man was big with dark, greasy hair and he wore a black leather jacket. You *must* remember him."

"Sorry," Bert said as he closed the till and locked it. "Can't help you... And if there was a big bloke in a black coat and with twenty fingers, so what? He didn't hurt this kid, did he?"

"Go back to the car, Jenny," Cantor ordered quietly, and she never knew what else he had said to Bert during the next few minutes.

"We'll keep an eye on this place," the Inspector said when he came back. "Don't get excited, Jenny. I believe you and I'm sure Bert was lying. It's just possible that the leather jacket will come back here, or of course Bert may be telephoning a warning to him now... Drive round the town slowly, George, and you, Jenny, keep a look-out for Tom and for your enemy too," and he picked up the radio telephone and gave the orders that Shrewsbury was to be searched until Tom and the hijacker were found.

"Now, Jenny," he said as he replaced the receiver. "You're sure that young Ingles promised to pick you up at the police station? Did he say when?"

"I don't think so. He was in such a hurry that he'd gone before I could ask him any more questions, but he knows that I'll be at the police station waiting for him. He told me to go there and find you, Mr. Cantor. If he's missed Three Fingers though - maybe the man had a motor-bike round the corner or got on a bus or something - I believe he might go on to the Swift and Sure lorry place and see the manager called Mr. Dank. It was for Ned Stacey, you see - because he's been sacked - but perhaps you don't know this?"

Mr. Cantor did not, so she explained what had happened this morning and the Inspector was impressed.

"You might be right, Jenny. I wanted to see Mr. Dank anyway as I've only spoken to him on the telephone. We'll go now but you'll have to stay in the car and talk to George after he's telephoned to headquarters... Drive to the Swift and Sure, please."

The lorry depot was a dismal yard in a side street. On the left, just inside the big gates, was an ugly, old-fashioned double-fronted house with a plate on the gatepost announcing that this was the registered office of the Swift and Sure Transport Company. There were four lorries in the yard and several men working on them looked up in surprise when the police car drove in.

Cantor got out, looked round and then spoke to his driver.

"Stay here, George, but you can turn the car. Ask Jenny to give you a description of young Ingles and what he was wearing, and the same for Three Fingers. Tell them that I want these two badly, but I may get some help from Dank. And try not to fret, Jenny. We shall find Tom, never fear. He may even have turned up at the station by now and if he has you needn't fetch me."

They watched him ring the bell and rather to their surprise saw the door opened by a plump little man wearing a green tweed suit and a red tie. They saw him glance quickly at the police car and heard him say, "Come in, Inspector. I have been expecting you."

* * *

Meanwhile Tom got a very different impression of Mr. Dank, the manager of the Swift and Sure Transport Company. As soon as he had left Jenny in the doorway of the sweet shop to follow the man with three fingers he began to wonder whether he was handling this situation properly. Possibly the man had not overheard what he had told Jenny in the cafe, but now that he had a little more time for thought he realized that there was not much he could do. If Jenny found a policeman quickly, and if Cantor were in Shrewsbury, they might send a car at once, but it might have been wiser not to separate.

Three Fingers, on the other side of the street, was not hurrying. He stopped once to look in a shop window but did not turn round. Even if he did hear me, Tom thought grimly, he would never believe that I would have the nerve to follow him.

They were now in a part of the town that he did not know, and he was surprised when the man in the leather coat turned sharply to his right up a narrow street. As soon as he disappeared Tom tried to cross the road but was checked by the traffic. He ran desperately to the corner and was just in time to see his quarry accelerating out of sight on a motorcycle which was too far away for him to see its number.

Tom leaned against the wall and mopped his face, hoping that he did not look as silly as he felt. What to do now? There was no longer any chance of following the man and not much hope of finding Jenny unless she was now at the police station. If she was there might be a chance of them sending a patrol car down to Bert's cafe, but he would look a fine fool if they found him there. Obviously it would be more sensible to go straight to the police station himself. And show Jenny that he had failed?

Then he had a better idea. Why not go to the Swift and Sure at once and see Dank and get that business settled? If the manager was there it should not take very long to convince him of Ned's innocence and then he could go on to the police. Jenny would remember that he meant to go there anyway.

Then he realized that he did not know the address, and it took him five or six minutes before he found a postman who was able to direct him and another quarter of an hour before he found it. It seemed rather odd for the office to be in the ugly house outside which he was standing, and as there was nobody to ask whether Mr. Dank was in he screwed up his courage and rang the bell.

The door was opened by a tired-looking girl who seemed so surprised that she had nothing to say.

"I want to see Mr. Dank, the manager, please," Tom said. "I hope he is in and has got time to see me because it's urgent."

"Does he know you're coming, because I think he's engaged? I shall have to tell him your name and why you want to see him if it's so urgent that you can't wait. Or shall I give him a message?"

Tom was puzzled because she seemed apprehensive. He was reasonably sure that there was not anything about him which could scare anybody and the girl obviously did not realize how nervous he was. But it was too late to back out now.

"Please tell him that I've a message for him from his driver Ned Stacey, who was beaten up on Monday night. I'm Tom Ingles - the chap who was with him. What I have to tell him is very important."

The girl gave him a startled look.

"Come in and wait. I'll tell Mr. Dank."

She showed him into a small office, furnished with only two chairs, a typing desk and a filing cabinet. The only cheerful sight was a vase of flowers on the desk.

Tom was still wondering how anybody could work all day in a stuffy office like this when she came back.

"He'll see you," she said, and led him upstairs and pointed to a closed door. He thought, but could not be sure, that she said, "Be careful what you say. Knock before you go in," before going down again.

Tom did as he was told and waited until a man's voice called "Come in". As he closed the door behind him Tom experienced a sudden feeling of panic. There was nothing frightening about the room or indeed about the man sitting behind the desk. Mr. Dank was small, plump and balding. He was wearing a nondescript tweed suit and a red tie and his hands were resting on the blotting pad as he stared, unblinking, at his visitor. His office was carpeted but sparsely furnished. Tom noticed two telephones, a large steel safe, a table on which was a carafe of water, and three filing cabinets against one wall.

And so, although there was every reason why a lad of Tom's age should feel nervous in such circumstances, the sudden, unreasoning fear which swept over him left him tongue-tied.

"What do you want, boy? Why have you come here?" Dank asked in an expressionless voice, and before Tom answered he remembered that Ned had once told him that the manager had behaved decently to him. This was difficult to imagine.

There was no going back now, so Tom, who had not been asked to sit down, rammed his hands in his pockets so that the man would not see that he was nervous, held his chin high and with considerable courage told who he was and why he had come.

"I had to come to see you, sir, because Ned only came back from hospital this morning and found that you had sacked him. He's still very shaken, sir, and the doctor has sent him back to bed. There's a muddle up somewhere because Ned told me as soon as we met that night that you had ordered him to turn off the main road at The Harrow and we were both looking for that pub all the way. There isn't any doubt of it, sir. He was obeying orders and I'm sure the furniture van was waiting for us. Somebody must have known we were turning off there and the driver of the van knew too... And so you see, sir, that the only thing Ned did wrong was to ask me to go with him. He's sorry about that and so am I. Maybe I asked him to take me and am to blame but we're both very sorry. I was coming to ask you to take back his notice because a mistake has been made. I'm sure he's trustworthy and he likes the job and he's a wonderful driver. He told me you'd been good to him, giving him his chance, and I know it wasn't his fault that we were hijacked. He's been double-crossed, sir. He wanted to come himself to see you but he's not fit enough. He put up a wonderful scrap, I can tell you, so will you please take him back?" While he had been speaking Dank never once took his eyes from his face and never interrupted. His own face remained expressionless.

"No, Ingles," he said quietly. "Stacey is discharged. He behaved irresponsibly and broke one of our important rules by giving you a lift. I advise you to forget all about this incident and to have nothing more to do with Stacey. You may go now."

"But you can't just sack him like that," Tom said hotly as he forgot his nervousness. "You haven't given him a chance to defend himself and that's why I'm here. Anyway, I've just seen the man who attacked us and I can give the police a description of him. I saw him in a cafe here in Shrewsbury only about an hour ago but he didn't see me."

Dank showed no surprise at this statement.

"Nonsense, boy. You're lying and you're wasting my time Get out."

"I'm not a liar!" Tom shouted. "What I've told you is true. The man who attacked Ned and me has only got three fingers on his right hand and by now the police have got his description and are searching the town for him. They'll find him too, and when the police get him and question him you'll find that he knew Ned's lorry would turn off the main road there."

A long silence followed this outburst, but it was eventually broken by a sharp click as a door behind Dank's desk opened slowly and the man with three fingers stepped into the room.

"That's the kid," he said to Dank, and then to Tom, "What's happened to that little red-headed bird you were with, mate?"

Tom tried to show that he was not afraid, but he realized, with horror, the significance of what he had done.

"She's at the police station now," he said bravely. "She went straight there when we left the cafe."

"And that's just where you won't be going, mate," Three Fingers said, and then, glancing at Dank for confirmation, he added, "And this bright young nosy-parker will be staying with us for a while, won't he?"

Tom looked round wildly and dashed for the door, but Three Fingers, moving incredibly quickly for so large a man, grabbed him, swung him round and then struck him a fearful blow on the side of his head with his clenched fist. A cascade of fiery lights danced before Tom's eyes as he sank to his knees with a moan of pain. He struggled to rise and the bully hit him

again. Mercifully, Tom was unconscious when he was hauled by Three Fingers into the little room behind the office. Then, after brief consultation with Dank, he was carried down a narrow flight of stairs into the kitchen quarters and then down again into a cellar, dumped on the damp floor and left behind a locked door.

* * *

Ten minutes later Dank was alone in his office. There was no sign of Three Fingers and he had sent his secretary home early, telling her that there was no more work for her to do. He glanced out of the window and saw some of his men working round two of the lorries, and then, selecting an unusual-looking key from those on his key-ring, he locked both the doors. Next he unlocked first the big safe and then one of the drawers with which it was fitted. From this drawer he lifted a small telephone, moved a switch and held it to his ear and seemed to wait a long time for a reply. If anyone else had been in the room it would have been obvious by his attitude that he was first making a report and then receiving instructions.

10. Friday Evening: Jenny Grows Up

George, the police driver, smiled. "Come along, Jenny. Tell me carefully what your boy friend looks like so that we can all be looking for him and then do your best with the chap with three fingers who was sitting behind you at Bert's. Just remember that what you tell me now will help us to find these two. And don't worry, We shall find them... Come along, girl."

Jenny did not think that she liked this policeman very much. While he had been speaking she was watching the men working round the lorries at the other end of the yard. Surely they would have seen Tom if he had been here and would tell her if they had? She put her hand on the door handle but George leaned across her and slipped up a catch on the lock.

"Sorry, Jenny. Inspector said you were to stay in the car and he meant it. What do you want?"

She told him, and it was clear that he did not believe that Tom had come here. The tears rose in her eyes as she realized that nobody except herself seemed really to care what happened to him and she had a feeling that he was not far away. All the same, there was not anything very practical that she could do until the Inspector came out and so she gave George the best description she could of the two people the police wanted.

"It's more important that you people find Tom before you run after that man with three fingers. You wouldn't even know that he was in town but for Tom. You telephone about him first, please, and I'll be thinking about the other man while you're doing it."

George gave a quick look at the girl sitting so tense and upright beside him. She was staring straight ahead and there was an expression of such misery on her beautifully shaped little face that he bit back the facetious remark he had been about to make. Then he lifted the telephone receiver and gave an excellent description of Tom.

"...And I've got the young lady who saw the man who set about young Stacey and Tom Ingles. She saw this chap two hours ago in Bert's cafe. Take this down slowly while she tells me... Here goes."

When she had finished, and George had replaced the receiver, she said coldly, "As you won't let me out of the car perhaps you'd care to drive across the yard and ask those men, who must wonder what we're doing here, if they've seen Tom Ingles here this afternoon. That's worth doing, isn't it? You might have saved yourself some telephoning if you'd asked them first. If I'd been Mr. Cantor I should have asked them before I rang the bell of this very peculiar house."

George, naturally enough, was startled. Could be a little spitfire, he thought. Nice, pretty kid, but this business has hit her hard. Could be that she will lead this lad Tom a pretty dance one day... And here comes the old man, which saves me some trouble.

Mr. Dank was standing at the open door again, but Jenny could not hear what Mr. Cantor said to him before he hurried to the car. The men at the other end of the yard looked towards them curiously, but she knew by one glance at the Inspector's face that he had no good news of Tom.

"Any news, George?" he asked as he got into the back seat. "I'd like to have heard that young Ingles had reported to the station but we'll get back there... Sorry, Jenny. He hasn't been here. Mr. Dank is sorry too, but he can't change his mind about Stacey because he broke the rule about giving lifts."

"Just a minute, *please*" Jenny pleaded. "Your policeman wouldn't let me ask those men over there if they've seen Tom. Will you ask them or shall I?"

"They can't have seen him, Jenny, because he hasn't been here. Stay where you are, if you please. I've been through the list of all lorries and loads going out tonight. I'm satisfied that everything here is straightforward. You must realize that we cannot interfere with the way in which Mr. Dank runs his business. It's not a crime for them to discharge a young man whom they consider has not shown the responsibility for which he was being paid... Back now, George."

As the police car drove out of the yard Jenny, who was beginning to think she had never met anyone as stubborn as Inspector Cantor, turned round and pleaded once again with him.

"I know you think I'm behaving like a silly schoolgirl, Mr. Cantor, and I expect you believe that I shan't see sense because Tom Ingles is my boy friend. I don't like Ned Stacey very much but it's true I only met him for the first time this morning, but Tom likes him. Tom would never make a friend of anybody who is a liar. You can't know Tom as I do, but I'm absolutely certain of this... Tom was there with Ned. They were both attacked by the man with three fingers and they were both very brave and might have been killed. You think Mr. Dank is telling the truth and that Ned Stacey is a liar, don't you?"

Inspector Cantor blinked at her in surprise. This brave little redhead was virtually cross-questioning him! It was difficult to know how to answer her but he did make the right answer this time.

"You must be patient with us, Jenny. We're doing our best to find your boy friend, who, I'm inclined to think, is a lucky chap. We're also looking for the three-fingered man. I certainly believe Tom, who I talked to in the hospital, but I'm not so sure about young Stacey. And because I'm not yet certain it's not possible to make up my mind about Mr. Dank. Now do you see? You must trust us and help us when we ask you, but you won't help Tom by doubting if we're doing our best. Surely you see that?"

Jenny covered her face with her hands.

"Of course I do, but you just talk and talk at me when I want you to see that there are really only two things that could have happened to Tom. The first is that he's been tricked by Three Fingers and sort of kidnapped, and the other is that Mr. Dank is the liar and that Tom has been to the Swift and Sure. Tom knew I was going to the police station to wait for him and by now, if he could, he would have telephoned... We're here now and I'm going to wait here for him until he either comes himself or we get news of him."

She walked into the police station with her head held high. Mrs. Morton was waiting in the Inspector's office and as soon as she saw Jenny she knew

that there was no good news.

"The man in the cafe pretends that he hadn't seen Three Fingers and that I was making up a story," Jenny said bitterly as she sat down. "Nobody has seen Tom or the other man and I believe Tom then went on to the lorry place to see Mr. Dank for Ned. Mr. Cantor made me stay in the police car, but he says Mr. Dank told him Tom hadn't been there. I don't believe him, Mrs. Morton. Everything is working against Tom, and I'm sure it's because he knows too much. It's just plain sense to me. I'm sure now that that vile Three Fingers heard what Tom was telling me in the cafe and I expect he saw how frightened I was when I noticed his hand. We didn't think he'd noticed us, but he's been too clever for us. He didn't show us that he knew and he let us go out of the cafe without giving the game away... Of course I don't know what happened when Tom followed him. I saw the man come out of Bert's place and I'm sure he didn't look up the street and see us. Tom was hiding in a shop doorway anyway, and I don't think Three Fingers would have noticed me peeping round and watching him because we were quite a long way off. I saw him light a cigarette and then go off in the opposite direction... I hope you'll believe me even if the inspector doesn't."

Cantor, sitting on the corner of his desk, glanced at Mrs. Morton and shrugged his shoulders. It was true that he had met the Lone Piners before, but little Jenny Harman was no longer an irresponsible schoolgirl as she had reminded him just now. She was certainly proving that she had grown up.

"I don't suppose the Inspector disbelieves you, Jenny," Mrs. Morton said quickly. "We all know that he's doing all he can to find Tom and the other man too. There's nothing more we can do here and the truth is that we're getting in the way. I'm going to take you back to Witchend now because the others will want to know what's happened, and as soon as the Inspector has any news I know that he'll telephone Mr. Ingles. We shall be in touch all the time. You must see that you can't stay here all the evening."

Jenny looked as if she did not understand.

"But I must stay here. Tom told me to find Mr. Cantor and that he would meet me at the police station. Please don't try to persuade me to come with you. I'm going to wait here until Tom comes or sends me a message. He

told me that it all depended on me and you must understand that I can't run away now."

"But it isn't running away, Jenny."

"You may not think so, Mrs. Morton. I thought you would understand because you've always been so kind to me. Tom said something else to me too. Something more important than anything. He said I was his girl - and so I am. And I'm going to stay here."

There were tears in the older woman's eyes as she got up from her chair and put an arm round Jenny's shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Jenny. I shall go back now. Perhaps Mr. Cantor will allow you to stay until there is some news of Tom. I'll give your love to the others and we'll look forward to the good news that Tom has been found and is bringing you home. Do you agree, Inspector?"

"She may stay. There's a waiting-room downstairs and a canteen and I'll arrange for her to be looked after by a police-woman. You're a brave girl, Jenny. We'll send out another call and there are three patrol cars round the town now. I know you gave George a description of Tom and the other man, but just tell me again now before Mrs. Morton goes what is the most noticeable thing about Tom? Suppose you didn't know him? Suppose you were a constable on the beat and you got this call about him. What would you look for first? Forget for a moment what you told George. Imagine I'm the constable. What should I look for first? A beard? A cap? A leather jacket?"

"None of those things. He's fair and taller than me and his eyes are blue and he's very strong-looking. He was wearing a blue shirt and khaki trousers and I've just remembered the most important thing of all. I don't believe I told your driver that he was wearing a bright yellow scarf with blue horseshoes on it... I gave it to him this morning and that seems years ago now. I'm very, very sorry I forgot this. I s'pose it's because I was so worried. Have I done something really awful and will it be my fault if you never find him?"

"I'm glad you've remembered it now, Jenny. I'm sure the scarf will help us. Good girl," he said with his hand on the telephone. "Thank you for your help, Mrs. Morton. We'll look after Jenny and send her home to Ingles in a police car if necessary... Go down with Mrs. Morton, Jenny, and I'll send P.C. Dowling to look after you."

"Thank you for letting me stay, Mr. Cantor," Jenny said as she went to the door. "I won't worry you all, I promise, but I do want to say one more thing. If Ned is telling the truth - and I know Tom believes him - the only man who could have told Three Fingers that the lorry was going to turn off the main road at that pub is the man who gave Ned the orders to do it. And that man is Mr. Dank."

The Inspector crossed the room and opened the door of his office.

"That had occurred to us, Jenny. Just be patient. See Mrs. Morton off and then wait downstairs... Good-bye."

The latter had been allowed to park her car in the yard at the side of the police station, and as Jenny walked across with her she said, "Thank you for being so nice to me, Mrs. Morton. I'm sure the others will understand why

I'm staying here - especially Peter... You do really think they'll soon find Tom, don't you?"

Mrs. Morton showed no sign of her fears. From what she had already heard, and from what the Inspector did not say, she was sure that Tom had got involved in something very ugly. She was sure too that the Inspector realized that Jenny herself could be in danger. She was the only one who could really identify the man the police were seeking.

"Of course they'll find Tom, dear. Be brave and patient. If you want to come home and there isn't a police car, just telephone Ingles and one of us will come and fetch you... Bless you."

Jenny watched her drive off with very mixed feelings. On the steps a woman police constable greeted her with a smile. She looked very smart in her uniform and pretty without her hat. Jenny liked her.

"I'm to make a fuss of you and give you some tea, the Inspector says. Come into the canteen and you can tell me why you're here. I've only just come on duty."

Jenny was now desperately tired and had a bad headache. She was indeed so weary and unhappy that she could not face telling her story again right from the beginning.

"On second thoughts don't bother yet, Jenny," she said. "My name is Margaret Dowling and you might as well call me Peggy. I've got some aspirin in my bag and you'd better take two with your tea."

Jenny liked Peggy Dowling who was kind and sympathetic. Soon the aspirin began to work and she found herself telling her about Tom at the farm and of her friends at Witchend and her own home at Barton Beach. Gradually she relaxed when a voice on the loudspeaker system actually mentioned her name.

"P.C. Dowling and Miss Harman wanted at once in Inspector Cantor's office."

Jenny went white and felt sick with excitement.

"It's Tom. They must have news of him. P'raps he's up there now. What are we waiting for?"

Peggy took her arm and tried to soothe her but she was shaking as they went upstairs.

Tom was not there - only a slightly embarrassed young constable.

"This officer has some news for us, Jenny. Your latest news about the yellow scarf you gave Ingles helped his memory. He was on his beat not very far from Bert's where a narrow street leads into a main road. He is reasonably sure that he saw a big man in a leather jacket on a motorbike at the right time. He remembers that he came out into the main road rather fast but he couldn't stop the man and didn't take his number."

"What about TOM?" Jenny interrupted. "Has he seen him?"

Cantor nodded to the constable who took a deep breath and said:

"I think so, miss. I remember the yellow scarf he was wearing. About fifteen minutes after seeing the man on the bike I was proceeding up Grove Street when I saw a young chap on the opposite pavement. There were a lot of shoppers about. He must have been in a hurry and have knocked a basket out of an old lady's hand. I noticed him because he was picking up everything for her and making quite a fuss of her and I could see his bright yellow scarf. He didn't see me and there was no need for me to cross the road and he was soon running off again. It's the scarf that made me remember."

"But that's wonderful!" Jenny cried. "It's the best news because now we know that he wasn't with Three Fingers. If that man had a motor-bike Tom wouldn't have a chance. I bet he was on the way to see Mr. Dank. Let's look at your big map, Mr. Cantor."

The Inspector crossed the room and pointed to a street on the big town map fixed to the wall.

"You may be right, Jenny. Constable Brown here isn't absolutely sure of the time but you can see from the map that Tom wasn't far then from the Swift and Sure place, but if he knew the way and was going to the depot he should have called there *before* we arrived. And Mr. Dank hadn't seen him."

"That's what he told you," Jenny said scornfully. "I don't believe him. Why don't we go back there and ask him again. Tom was going to see Mr. Dank for Ned's sake, and if he couldn't find Three Fingers I'm sure he'd go as quickly as he could to the Swift and Sure. I wish I could make you understand that if Tom says he is going to do a thing he does it. I tell you he's been tricked and kidnapped - or abducted, whatever you call it."

Then P.C. Dowling spoke up.

"I must tell you, sir, that my married sister is Mr. Dank's secretary. She should be home by now but she isn't on the telephone. If you send me at

once in a car she would tell me whether this lad Tom called at the depot this afternoon."

"Go now," Cantor ordered. "Take Jenny with you and report back immediately. You can be there in ten minutes. Hurry!"

Almost before she realized what was happening Jenny found herself in the patrol car again with driver George at the wheel and Peggy Dowling listening intently to Jenny's story of the hijacking,

Peggy's sister lived in a downstairs flat in a road of small houses on the outskirts of Shrewsbury. She opened the door and looked very startled when she saw the police car in the road and her uniformed sister with a pretty, redheaded girl.

"What's wrong, Peg? Why have you come here? Who's this kid? Jack will be home any minute and I'm just getting his tea."

"We'll come in, Joan, if you don't mind. I'm not going to keep you. We're looking for a young chap called Tom Ingles and Jenny here thinks he might have called to see your Mr. Dank this afternoon. You'd know if he did, wouldn't you? Did he?"

Joan's hand flew to her mouth and she stood aside for them to come in.

"Yes, he did. He was on Ned Stacey's lorry the other night when it was hijacked. He asked for the boss and said it was urgent. A man I don't know was with Mr. Dank when this boy came. He'd been there about a quarter of an hour and I didn't know whether I dare disturb them but I did. I don't know who this man was. He said he was sure that the boss would see him and just gave the name Harry. Mr. Dank saw him at once, and he was still there when I went up to tell him that this boy had a message from Ned Stacey. They looked at each other but didn't speak until Mr. Dank told me to show Ingles the door, and I was not to come back myself but to stay in my office and not disturb them again. He said he'd come and see me himself if he wanted anything-----"

"But Tom?" Jenny interrupted. "Where's Tom? What happened to him? Where is he now?"

"I don't know where he is. Still in Dank's office for all I know. The boss came down about half an hour after young Tom had gone upstairs and told me to go home early. He does that sometimes and I'm glad enough I can tell you. I'm thinking of leaving there although the money is good. I don't like the place. Dank is all right to me but there's something funny going on there. I didn't like that man who called himself Harry."

Jenny clutched her arm.

"Did you notice whether that man had only three fingers on his right hand? Was he wearing a black leather coat and was his hair black and long and greasy?"

Joan nodded. "Don't know about his fingers but he had a leather coat."

"And was he in there with Dank when Tom went up?"

"Must have been, I suppose. But I don't know because he told me not to go back in the room... Why are you asking all these questions? What's wrong, Peggy? Nothing has happened to that boy, I hope? I liked him."

"Thanks, Joan," her sister said. "You've told me what I wanted to know. I shouldn't go back to work for Mr. Dank if I were you... Come, Jenny. We'll telephone the boss."

Jenny was in a cold fury when they ran back to the car. For hours she had been trying to persuade people much older and more experienced than herself that Tom and Ned were victims of a conspiracy, and what they had just heard from Peggy's sister surely proved it. And poor Tom had walked straight into the trap and was now almost certainly in the power of Three Fingers and Dank who must be working together.

"Call Headquarters!" Peggy gasped to the startled driver as she got into the car and in ten seconds she was reporting to the information room and asking for instructions to proceed to the Swift and Sure Transport Company. In

under two minutes confirmation was received that the Inspector would meet them there. Under no circumstances was Jenny to be left unguarded or to leave the car.

Jenny sat intent and tight-lipped as George drove swiftly through the darkening streets. Most of the shops were closed now and as she clenched her hands in her lap Jenny was sure that this was the longest day she had ever lived through - and it was not over yet.

The Inspector's and another patrol car were already waiting as they drove into the otherwise empty yard. The lorries had gone. Cantor opened the door of the car and got in beside Jenny.

"Don't say I told you so, Jenny. And don't interrupt us now. Tell me again what your sister said, Constable."

Just as Peggy had finished another policeman came up.

"We've got two men watching the back, sir. There's a private garage round there but it's empty. An old chap who says he's a night-watchman answered the door and you might like to have a word with him. He swears that he's the only person on the premises and that everybody had gone when he arrived. He says that happens sometimes."

"But where's Tom?" Jenny whispered. "Where is he? They've taken him somewhere. I knew something like this would happen and I can't tell you how I hate you all. You've let this happen because you believed Dank."

"Stay here, Jenny," Cantor said curtly. "We'll search the house. If you try to get out of the car I'll have you driven back to Onnybrook. It's just possible that one or both men are hiding here, and if it hasn't dawned on you remember that you're important to them too. Don't make my job more difficult than it is already by making a fuss and exposing yourself to danger. You shouldn't be here now really."

So Jenny, dumb with misery, was left with P.C. Dowling and the silent George. And then at last the tears came, and as she groped for a handkerchief P.C. Dowling put an arm round her.

"We shall find Tom and these two men, my dear. They won't dare to hurt him. They must know by now that we're after them. You've been so brave and so has Tom. Is he so very special?"

"He's everything," she gulped. "I've got a terrible feeling that I'm not going to see Tom again. I'm sure something awful has happened to him."

George at the wheel turned round at this.

"Don't take it too hard, Jenny. I'm old enough to be your dad and I like your spirit, but we shall get these two and your boy. What Peggy says is right. They won't dare do him any real harm and he can't be far away."

"That's what you all keep saying. Three Fingers did him real harm the other night, didn't he? How can you say that he can't be far away when he may have been in this house only a quarter of an hour after leaving me. You can go a long way in three hours in a car if you know where you're going and how to get there. I know that he may be somewhere quite near, but he might be in Birmingham now or on his way to London. They'll never dare let him go now for he knows both men and can describe them... Here's Mr. Cantor but Tom isn't with him!"

The Inspector was very kind. He helped her out of the car as he told them that but for the old watchman the house was empty.

"We believe Tom has been kept in the cellar. There are footprints in the dust on the floor and we've found half a mug of cold tea there on a crate. There was a special lock on Mr. Dank's office and that has been dealt with. There is also a very big safe. Now, Jenny, I am going to telephone to Mr. Ingles and send you straight back. I told you before and I repeat that we shall find Tom and that I do not think these people will hurt him because he is valuable to them. You can do nothing here for us or for yourself, but you can help your friends and particularly Mr. and Mrs. Ingles by being with them. Tom would expect you to be with them. I promise that you shall all know what is happening. Now you must go. We're going to be busy."

She gave in. There was nothing more she could do. Almost before she realized what was happening she was being driven through the suburbs of

Shrewsbury and down the familiar road to the south.

The woman constable kept her hand over Jenny's clenched fist and after a while she felt the girl's fingers relax. She knew by her breathing that she was crying silently. Poor kid! Peggy Dowling hoped that Tom Ingles knew how lucky he was. Funny how these youngsters had got mixed up in this affair.

"Shan't be long now, Jenny," she said. "The farm is near Onnybrook, isn't it? You must tell George where to turn off when we get there. Who was that Mrs. Morton who was with you back at the station? You're lucky to have such nice friends."

Jenny gulped and whispered that she knew that. Already there was a little warm comforting thought at the back of her mind that she was going home.

It was nearly dark now because the clouds were still thick overhead. The car swept through Dorrington and Condover and several times passed great, lumbering lorries on their way down to Bristol and Wales. A pale glow of sunset still lingered in the western sky above the gentle slopes of the northern end of the Long Mynd. On the left Jenny saw the long straight ridge of the hill called The Lawley and three minutes later the bulk of Caradoc loomed over the vale. Next the lights of Church Stretton which their road by-passed and then the majestic Long Mynd dominated all the country to the west.

"Turn right soon - over the level crossing," Jenny said. "We're nearly there."

The overhanging trees made a dark tunnel of the road up the hill.

"Nice country," George said as he switched on the headlights. "Wouldn't mind living up here. Away from it all. First on the right again, Jenny?"

"Yes. It's a very narrow road. The farm is on the left."

They swung round into the familiar lane with the headlights slashing into the darkness and throwing curious shadows which chased each other along the hedgerows. Two minutes later they were there. The farmhouse door was

wide open, letting out a flood of golden light into which Dickie and Mary were running. George whistled in surprise when he saw that they were obviously twins. Then the car doors were opened from outside, and before she could say anything Jenny realized that David had his strong arms round her and was almost lifting her out. Then Peter was hugging her as if she had not seen her for a year and Dickie's clear voice relieved the tension.

"This is a funny old taxi to be brought home in I must say... Don't you worry, Jenny. The Lone Piners are going to help the police now. Everybody is here. Old man Cantor has been on the blower. Everybody everywhere is looking for Tom and I bet we find him tomorrow... Good evening, Madame Policeman, as the case may be."

"Don't be saucy," P.C. Dowling smiled. "I'd like to speak to Mrs. Morton. Please take me in to see her."

Slightly, but only slightly, subdued, Dickie led the way into the house while Jenny, not knowing whether to laugh or cry and doing a little of both, found Mary at her side.

"Hello, darling Jenny," she said. "It's lovely to have you home again."

11. Friday Night: Dank Discovered

George, the police driver, had already been in touch with headquarters reporting their arrival at Ingles when P.C. Dowling came out of the farmhouse with a burly, middle-aged man.

"This is Mr. Ingles, George. Tom's uncle. He knows the Inspector and has spoken to him on his own telephone."

"Just wanted to thank you for bringing that girl safely back to us," the farmer said gruffly. "Very kind to let her stay at the station this afternoon. Thank Inspector Cantor again for us. Young Jenny takes this badly. Hope she hasn't been a nuisance."

"Place won't be the same without her, sir," George smiled. "It's not for me to say but she's given the Inspector a thing or two to think about. She's a bright one and I'm sorry this trouble has come to you - and to her... What's happened to her today isn't much fun when you're young," he added wisely. "She'd go through hell for that lucky boy, wouldn't she?"

Alf Ingles nodded and opened the car door for Peggy.

"True enough. She would. The missus thinks of her as her own. And thank you, miss, for your kindness to Jenny. Ask the Inspector to telephone day or night just as soon as there is any news of the boy. There will always be somebody here. We know you're all doing your best. Good night to you both."

The two constables saluted him and then the car glided out into the lane.

"We're to report back right away," George said. "There's news though. They've found Dank's own car at his house. His wife says she doesn't know where he is and that he hasn't been home since breakfast. Don't like the way this business is shaping. Too many people disappearing."

His companion agreed but had not much else to say. "You're worrying about that redhead, aren't you?" George said as he pulled up at the foot of the hill

at the closed gates of the level crossing. "When you're new at the job you get sorry for those that are hurt and sometimes then you can't think straight - not if you show how sorry you are, anyway. All the same, I'd like to have a hand in finding that lad before he comes to any harm. That's what you were thinking, wasn't it?"

Peggy nodded as a freight train hauled by a giant diesel thundered past. When the clatter had died away and the gates had swung back, George went on, "I was born ten miles or so north of Shrewsbury, but sometimes when I was a kid my dad would bring me for a day's hike over this Long Mynd. There used to be a station here once but they've knocked it down. Didn't pay, I suppose, but we used to come down this way on a cheap day trip and walk up one or other of these valleys to the top. There's an old road linking one or two of the villages close under the hill. It's not used much now they've got the by-pass, I reckon, but I'll take you back that way. Won't really take much longer."

"Who's being sentimental now?" Peggy laughed. "I wouldn't have thought it of you, George. Just because you used to come to these villages as a boy. What is there to see in the dark, anyway?"

There was not much really. After turning left off the bypass George drove slowly through the straggling village of Onnybrook, and it was not long before the last of the houses was behind them. The old road twisted and turned and it was very dark under the trees. It was quiet too, but where the hedgerows were low and the trees thinned out they could see, now that the heavy clouds had cleared, the steep slopes of the great hill against the starlit sky.

"Wish I could remember where my old man used to take me," George mused. "It was somewhere off this road. There was an ordinary farm gate across a track and the brook running down the side of it. He taught me to tickle for trout in that stream. Must have been somewhere about here. One of these days I'll come back and look for it."

Then, as he swung the big car carefully round a sharp right bend, they saw, fifty yards ahead on the left of the road, a small van tilted into a ditch.

"Trouble again," George muttered. "We can't avoid it. Looks to me as if he's run into a telegraph pole... Not long ago either. His rear lights are still on."

He pulled up carefully in front of the wrecked van so that his car would not block the narrow road and took an electric torch from the glove compartment in front of him.

"Come along, officer," he said grimly. "The driver may still be in there."

He was - slumped rather horribly over the wheel and obviously unconscious. George had difficulty in forcing the door open because the impact of the collision had smashed the nearside wing, and buckled the bonnet and bodywork. Peggy held the torch while he struggled to ease it and when he succeeded the man's body slid towards them a few inches although his hands still gripped the wheel. He was an ordinary looking little man. Rather plump and wearing a greenish tweed suit and a red tie. On the seat beside him was a matching tweed hat which must have been jerked off his balding head when the van hit the telegraph pole.

"Better get him out on the road as gently as we can and see what's wrong," Peggy suggested. "He may have broken some ribs when he was forced against the wheel and there may be pressure on them now."

"O.K. then. But call headquarters first and get them to send an ambulance. Leave me the torch. I want to see how this happened."

Peggy reported where they were and what they had found and was told to wait with the casualty until the ambulance arrived, report again, and then get back to Shrewsbury as soon as possible.

"This chap is not too good," George said when she had given him the message. "By the look of it his front tyre burst and there wasn't much he could do about it when he skidded. His breathing is very heavy, Peggy. Get him out on the grass verge."

This they managed to do, and by the light of the torch examined him as best they could for injuries. He groaned a little as they moved him, but when he was stretched out on a rug his breathing became easier and he showed signs

of recovering consciousness. Peggy opened the collar of his shirt and then unbuttoned his cardigan and felt his chest. His heart was beating fairly steadily, although she still believed that he might have cracked or broken some ribs against the steering wheel. A big bruise coming up on his forehead was probably the result of the blow that had stunned him.

As she buttoned his jacket again the man's wallet fell out. George picked it up.

"Might as well find out who he is. Save time at the hospital and we shall have to report it." He looked without success first of all for a letter in its envelope and then found a driving licence which he opened. Peggy, who was wiping the man's forehead as she tried to make him more comfortable, heard George draw in his breath sharply with surprise.

"Well, blow me down," she heard him say. "There was something about that chap you're fussing over that reminded me of somebody I'd seen recently. The driving licence he's carrying is made out in the name of Dank - the manager of the Swift and Sure - and if we haven't won the jackpot we've got a consolation prize. True I only saw him for a few seconds this afternoon and although there's nothing special about him to look at I remember that suit and tie... Now we might as well find out why he's driving about in an old van like this with no name on it. How's the patient?"

"Coming round, I think. Better put the wallet back in his pocket... Here comes the ambulance."

As soon as Dank was safely wrapped in blankets on the stretcher, George told the driver that the police were interested in this man and that he would be reporting to his senior officer at once.

"And he'll be interested to know what this Mr. Dank says when he gets chatting," he went on. "I reckon the Inspector will be sending somebody to the hospital right away to ask him some questions, so take care of him... Cheerio!"

The ambulance drove off and as the twin red lights disappeared George turned to his companion.

"I'll report now and while I'm doing it will you take the torch and have a look over the van? Ought to have done that before maybe. Don't leave any fingerprints and wear gloves, but we ought to see why he's using a rotten old van like this. He might be carrying something in the back. No need to force those doors though. You should be able to see from the driving seat."

Peggy took the torch and walked over to the battered little van which had perhaps now taken its last journey. She had already realized that one of the most fascinating parts of police work was finding out the truth. Why, she wondered, had this man Dank left his own car at home, picked up this old van somewhere and gone off in it without telling anybody - not even his wife? If his wife was telling the truth, of course. And if he wanted to get somewhere quickly and suddenly why choose a van unless he needed to carry something? And what would he want to carry so soon after the Inspector had interviewed him in his office? What was the truth? Within the next few minutes this commonplace, shabby van which might well have been stolen and was now looking rather sinister might disclose a secret which could lead them to the faithful Jenny's boy friend and to the man with three fingers.

With the torch in her left hand she swept the beam carefully over the seat from which they had just moved the unconscious body of Mr. Dank, but there was nothing obvious to be seen there. The floor under the control pedals was filthy with dust and scraps of rubbish which suggested that the vehicle was not often used. She sniffed to see whether her nose could detect a clue to its owner but all she could smell was petrol. Then she knelt on the seat and directed the beam into the dark interior but all she could see at first was a mess of dirt and rubbish and what looked like some oily rags.

Still she was uneasy and not quite satisfied. A more careful look indicated that the floor of the van was marked with broad scratches almost as if something heavy had been dragged across it. George was still busy on the telephone in the patrol car, so she clambered out and hurried round to the back of the van and tried the doors. To her surprise they were not locked and opened without difficulty.

Now she could see better. The beam showed that the drag marks stopped at the edge of the floor of the van, suggesting that something heavy had been

there not long ago. She moved the light inch by inch up and down the rubbish, wondering what it was that had recently been loaded in there by Mr. Dank and where he had taken it. Whatever it was it was certainly bulky. Perhaps a sack containing some irregularly shaped objects?

She moved the light up and down the dusty metal sides of the van and suddenly dropped it in surprise. It fell amongst the oily rubbish on the floor and when she grabbed it again her heart was thumping with excitement and her hand shook as she moved the beam upwards.

There was no doubt of it. In the dust was traced, as if with a shaky finger, two vitally important words:

TOM INGLIS

12. Saturday: The Sign of the Hawk

The next day dawned bright and clear - just the sort of summer's day for a village flower show. The Mortons breakfasted together, and although they were all rather subdued with thoughts of Tom and the beastliness of what they were becoming involved in, the twins, at first, did their best to be normally cheerful.

"The trouble about our trouble," Mary said as she spread honey thickly on a slice of brown bread and butter, "is that we can't do much to help. Mr. Cantor will be jealous if we take over, won't he, twin?"

"What about Mackie?" Dickie suggested. "Nobody has thought of using him as a tracker dog. S'pose we let him sniff something of Tom's and take him into that smelly cafe Jenny told us about and then set him on the trail. How about that?"

"Absolutely riddickerlus," his twin decided. "The only sort of smells that would be round a cafe like that would be smells that would make him hungry and greedy... All the same, Mummy, what *are* we going to do about Tom? Isn't there any way we could help? Somehow everything is different and rather horrid since we came here this time. We're not so much together as we were and although we're all pretending to be brave I feel sick inside about him."

"And about Jenny too," Dickie added and looked speculatively at his brother. "What shall we do today, David? We can't do ordinary things like swimming up at Hatchholt or making a camp because all the time we shall be wondering about Tom and not enjoying anything... Why doesn't that man Cantor call us in? And where's Peter anyway? Perhaps *she's* got some ideas, although it would be good if this family could think of some."

"Peter is coming here as soon as she's ready," David said sharply. "I expect she's talked things over with her father and maybe he'll come along with her. We can all go to Ingles now if you like, although I'm sure Jenny will be round if there's any news... Tom disappeared in Shrewsbury and Jenny has

told the police everything they did. There's nothing we can do there. We don't know where to start looking for Dank or for the thug who went for Tom and Ned. We all feel the same about Tom, but we might go down and see Ned Stacey. Somebody ought to tell him about Tom and he might remember something which would help. What do you think, Mother?"

Mrs. Morton looked across at the twins before she answered. Dickie was flushed but Mary turned away and brushed her hand across her eyes.

"We all feel the same about this. It's no use pretending that Tom isn't in danger. I think before all else that we must help Jenny to get by this time of waiting for news. I really do believe that the police will find him soon and we must all show Jenny that we believe this. But you twins are old enough to realize that this isn't a game."

Dickie said, "I bet Cantor has forgotten all about us."

"I'm sure he hasn't," Mrs. Morton said. "That nice policewoman who brought Jenny back last night told me again that they would let us have any news and they will."

"Even if it's bad news?" David asked, and then regretted the question.

"Even if it's bad news," his mother agreed. "I'll tell you what I think you must all do. I told you to look after Jenny, but whatever you do or wherever you go you must never leave her alone. The police told me that too. Jenny is, the police believe, the only person who has seen this man off his guard and would recognize him again. Don't let her know this but show her how much you care for her and Tom by being as cheerful as you can. It's the flower show at the Hall this afternoon and it's opened at three o'clock. We'll all go. I'll come with you and we'll ask Mr. Sterling too. We'll put on a brave face and go and anyway it's always been a big day for the village... Here's somebody coming now. It's Jenny."

David ran over to the door thinking, as he did so, that although they had only been at Witchend a few days, opening the door to people who usually brought bad news was becoming a habit.

Jenny's face was paler than usual, her eyes dark-ringed, and she had been running so fast that she was breathless. She clung to David as he put his arm round her and helped her into the room. Mrs. Morton pulled forward a chair.

"Jenny dear, do please try and calm down. Whatever you have to tell us can wait a few moments. We were making plans for today but perhaps you're going to alter them all. There's some coffee left in the pot and you must drink some before you try to tell us anything."

Jenny took the cup and gave them a feeble smile of thanks. Dickie, behind her chair, looked tense and scared.

"I was right," Jenny gasped. "I was right about that man Dank. The Inspector has just telephoned, and although they haven't found Tom yet they're sure that he was taken somewhere by Mr. Dank in an old van last night. Dank had a burst tyre and crashed into a telegraph pole somewhere near Onnybrook and was taken to hospital. He's still there but I don't think he can tell the police anything because he was knocked silly in the accident."

"What about Tom?" Mary interrupted.

"I was just trying to tell you. They think he's been taken somewhere in the back of this old van because he wrote his name in the dust inside. So he can't have been unconscious. And he can't have been tied up either... TOM INGLES he wrote and I'm sure this proves that he was taken somewhere fairly near because Dank wouldn't have had time to have got very far considering the Inspector saw him at the Swift and Sure in the afternoon. I believe Tom was a prisoner in that house while we were there and I've a feeling that he can't be so very far away now... And wherever he is he might escape. And if he's a prisoner I'm wondering if we couldn't make up a search party... But there's another frightening thing. Suppose he's been taken to Three Fingers who is looking after him? And s'pose that isn't far away? Mr. Cantor wouldn't speak to me - just to Mr. Ingles - but of course he said that we're not to worry. Everybody says that but it doesn't help Tom, does it? *What can we do now?*"

They all looked at her in dismay and only Mrs. Morton had an answer.

"You may not think that we're helping Tom now, Jenny, and we all know how you feel. I believe that we've got to wait for something to come to us. We've got to have courage and faith and save ourselves for the time when we really can do something. It's the police who are doing the work now and we must keep out of their way until they want us. I am sure that before we go to bed tonight something else will have happened and I believe too that we may well be shown what we have to do when the time comes. We all seem to belong to each other now, don't we? And Tom belongs to us too."

"That's right, Mum," Dickie said very loudly, hoping that none of them would notice the lump in his throat. "That's right. So he does."

Mrs. Morton smiled at her youngest son.

"Just one more thing," she went on. "The sort of thing that sometimes parents are afraid, or too shy to mention to their children. There's nothing pious or sentimental in suggesting that even only thinking a quiet and secret prayer for Tom will help him to keep his courage up. I'm sure it will. And help us too... Now I'm going to wash up and if you've all made your beds I suggest you go and meet Peter who is sure to be on her way here now. David suggested just now that you might go down to the village and see Ned and that's not a bad idea. Then this afternoon we are all going to the flower show."

And with that she smiled at them and turned to go.

Before she reached the door, however, Jenny ran across the room and flung her arms round her. For once she could not find the words to say what was in her heart but Mrs. Morton understood. She kissed Jenny's red curls lightly and said, "Be off with you now, darlings," and went into the kitchen closing the door behind her. When Jenny turned to face the others her eyes were shining and her voice was steady as she said, "Come on. Let's go and meet Peter."

They met her halfway along the track to Hatchholt. Mr. Ingles had telephoned and told them the news and she agreed at once to go down to

Onnybrook with them. She told them also that her father had suggested that they all go to the flower show this afternoon.

"I thought at first that it seemed awful to do that while we're waiting for news of Tom," she went on, "but then Daddy said that we couldn't help him by not going and that he was a brave lad, and he was sure that Tom would expect us to go and that anyway he would want to know all about it when the police found him."

"Just what we think," Jenny said brightly. "We've promised to take Mrs. Morton and if your father comes too that will be grand. We thought we ought to go and see Ned Stacey now and tell him what's happened and ask him whether he can remember anything about Mr. Dank that will help the police."

If Peter was surprised at Jenny's spirit she did not show it, and they went as cheerfully as they could down to the village where everybody seemed to be getting ready for the flower show.

"Dad says either Colonel or Mrs. Panthill will be opening the show this afternoon," Peter told them.

"I hope it's not Mrs. Hillpants," Mary said. "I think she's dismal... Do you think this is Ned Stacey coming? We thought he might look like that."

"Yes, it is," Jenny agreed. "I s'pose I'm the only one who knows him. What are we going to say and where are we going to talk? I don't think he likes me much really."

"He won't have a chance with us all," David laughed. "I don't expect he's too bad. Help me soften him up, Peter."

Ned's head was still bandaged and he looked pale and miserable. He was wearing very tight black trousers, pointed shoes and a cowboy shirt. As he came nearer they saw his eyes widen in surprise at the sight of the twins and then flicker with more interest when Peter and Jenny smiled at him.

"Hello, Ned," the latter greeted him. "These are my friends. Tom's friends too. We were coming to see you to tell you what's happened to him. Did you know he'd been to see Mr. Dank for you and now he's been captured by him and the man who attacked you both. Did you know that?"

Ned flushed. "Yes I did and I'm right sorry. Policeman came to see me this morning and told me. He wanted to know what more I could tell him about Dank and there wasn't much except that it's as clear as the nose on your face that he made a first-class fool of me. And I reckon I ought to say thanks very much to you, Jenny, for going along with Tom and helping him. I'd like to know more about what happened but my mum's at home and she'd fuss if we all went there."

Jenny smiled at him with real pleasure. Something had changed Ned and even though he might be spoiled and selfish it seemed as if he liked her after all. And in a way he was saying he was sorry too.

Then David introduced himself and the others, and suggested that they walk round the recreation ground where only a few children were playing and exchange news and Ned agreed. Jenny told her story of yesterday again and told him frankly that she had always been against Tom going to the Swift and Sure, and that the bravest thing he had ever done was to try to follow the man with three fingers.

"So it was," Ned agreed. "Tom's no chicken. What you kids doing now to find him? What's that bloke Cantor been saying to you?"

David took a poor view of being addressed so patronizingly, but told him all they knew, which was not much.

"Jenny believes that Tom is somewhere fairly near and in the power of Three Fingers," he went on. "We don't know yet whether Dank has been talking to the police and if so what he's said. He may give Three Fingers away and if he does they'll find Tom in no time. We're going to the flower show this afternoon and maybe we'll see you there and pass on any news. Are you coming, Ned?"

"Come this afternoon, Ned," Jenny said impulsively. "I know we're going to have Tom back soon so let's stick together. We'll look out for you."

"O.K.," he said. "See you," and this the Lone Piners took to be a gracious acceptance.

* * *

The officers and committee of the Onnybrook Horticultural Society had worked hard throughout the week to make the best of the site offered to them by Colonel Panthill. Volunteers had scythed the long grass, borders had been cleared of weeds and overgrown shrubs and two big marquees had gone up for the exhibits of flowers and vegetables.

There were side shows too, because this annual event had always been a village fete as well as a flower show.

The Lone Piners, escorting Mrs. Morton, were amongst the first to pay their entrance money. They had tried to persuade either Mr. or Mrs. Ingles to come too but neither would leave the other or the house in case the police telephoned.

A stone-paved terrace flanked one side of the house with a flight of shallow steps leading down to the two tennis courts on which the tents were set up. At the top of these steps was a table, three chairs and a microphone.

"I knew something awful like this would happen," Dickie murmured to his twin. "Somebody is going to make a speech. Probably old Hillpants. Is it too early to find where they sell ices?"

Mrs. Morton assured the twins that the time was not yet and that not until the show was officially opened could they start eating again. Meanwhile Jenny, in spite of all her efforts, was feeling miserable again because she could not think of anything but Tom. David and Peter were looking at each other as if there was nobody else there and it was a shock when somebody took her arm and said:

"Hello, Jenny. I've been wondering what had happened to you all. Why haven't any of you been along to see me? I haven't solved the hawk clue yet and I don't suppose we ever will until we get inside this house and look round."

Jenny looked at Amanda Gray in astonishment, realizing that she had not even thought about this young woman for two days. Of course she would still be fussing about this imaginary treasure,

"But I see you're all here," Amanda prattled on. "All except that farm boy Tom. Good afternoon, Mrs. Morton. This is quite an occasion for the village, I've been told. Hello, twins. Hello, David and Peter. I've been wondering whether one or two of us could slip into the house and have a quick look round while everybody is busy out here. I expect it's empty now and will stay like that until the show closes. What about you, David? Will you come in with me? Maybe the best time would be when somebody is speaking? It will be Colonel Panthill I'm told, because his wife is only just back from hospital. P'raps Peter would like to come too? I don't mind."

Jenny felt her hot temper rising fast but luckily David spoke first.

"We're not very interested in a treasure, Mrs. Gray. Just now we don't want to be bothered with anything except finding Tom Ingles. Obviously you haven't heard about this yet but he's been captured by the thugs who hijacked him with Ned Stacey the other night. The police are on his trail now, we hope, but you'll understand that we've got to help to find him."

"And I'd rather you didn't suggest that any of them should trespass with you in the Colonel's house," Mrs. Morton said. "Now here comes the Colonel and his lady with the Chairman of the Horticultural Society."

The latter was obviously nervous. He had held the same office for the last fifteen years because nobody had had the courage to suggest that he should give way to a younger man but this was his greatest moment. He failed to make the best of it.

Eventually he managed to convey the Society's gratitude to their new friends at the 'All for allowing them to hold the biggest of all their shows in

the grounds. He was also sorry about Mrs. Panthill's accident but glad to see her back and would the Colonel now declare the show open.

The Colonel was looking spruce and confident. Mrs. Panthill looked neither. One leg was encased in plaster and she had hobbled across her own terrace on two sticks. She was pale, heavily made-up and badly dressed in an outfit which would have been more suitable in the West End of London. As her husband stood with his hands in the pockets of his beautifully tailored jacket waiting for the applause to subside, she wished it was all over and that she could be on her bed and close her eyes. The only thing for which she was thankful was that she was not well enough to make a speech.

It was soon obvious that the Colonel was enjoying the occasion. He started by saying what a pleasure it was for him and his dear wife to welcome the people of Onnybrook so soon after their arrival in the village. They were proud to have this splendid annual event staged in the grounds of Pontesford Hall and hoped that this was the first of many such happy occasions. (Applause.)

"It is our earnest wish that all who live within our parish boundaries should, in time, share some of the beauty and peace which we hope to re-establish in these grounds. We have some thought of opening part of them at all times of the year to those who would appreciate them. The days of privately owned pleasure grounds have gone for ever, my friends, and when we have had time to re-plan and clean up these gardens we will raise the matter again in the right quarters... My wife and I have felt that perhaps the two tennis courts where you have staged your exhibits today might give more pleasure to the youth of Onnybrook than to the elderly couple whose privilege it is to have come to live amongst you."

(Tremendous applause, during which Mrs. Panthill was seen to look down her nose with a marked lack of enthusiasm for the youth of Onnybrook.)

Feeling now that he had his audience exactly where he wanted it, the Colonel warmed to his self-appointed task.

"And mention of the youth of the village," he went on, "gives me the opportunity of referring to two brave lads known to us all. Ned Stacey, who

behaved with marked courage when two armed bandits attacked the lorry he was driving last Monday night, is now happily back from hospital and I hope with us this afternoon. My wife and I, returning from a dinner party that night, were lucky indeed to be the first on the scene of the hold-up and were able to get the two lads to hospital. It was strange that we did not then know who they were. As you all know now, Ned's companion was Tom Ingles. The police have informed me that he too behaved with remarkable courage, and although there is now some mystery as to his whereabouts, we all hope that Tom will soon be with us again. Of this matter perhaps I should say no more now, but possibly we might consider later some sort of modest hero's welcome for these two brave lads..."

He paused here for further inspiration and applause, but it was noticeable that the latter was not quite as fervent as before. He did not seem to understand that his audience was embarrassed by his fulsome flattery of Ned and Tom and were beginning to be bored. Several people at the back of the crowd slipped away, and although the Lone Piners - and particularly Jenny - would have liked to do so, they were too near the front to get away easily. The exceptions were David and Peter who had been absorbed in each other, and without deliberately meaning to do so found themselves far to the right of the others below the terrace.

As the Colonel droned on, Peter suddenly hated everything that was happening except David's arm round her waist. Suddenly she leaned her head against his shoulder and whispered, "I'm sick of this, David. Take me away. I can see Daddy now with Mrs. Morton and Jenny is with them so she's all right, and the twins look trapped. I can't see Amanda but I'm bored with her."

He nodded, took her hand, and in a few seconds they were away from the crowds and round the corner of the terrace, and it was from that moment that fortune began to smile on them all again. The first thing that happened was that Peter found herself being kissed. David was holding her close against him, and as she raised her face to look up at him he kissed her with such love and tenderness that she was overwhelmed with a happiness that brought tears to her eyes. Neither of them had anything to say. There was

no need of words until she gently disengaged herself and whispered, "Oh, David. Growing up is wonderful."

They stood together in a shadowy corner of the big house almost without realizing where they were. Not far away, two hundred people were still being subjected to the Colonel's self-satisfied eloquence as his voice boomed over the loudspeakers. There was no other sound, and this particular corner of the house was not even attractive to look at. There was, in fact, something rather chilling about its lifelessness. The walls were thick with ivy, the paving stones below were damp and green with moss and what windows there were stared at them with blind eyes.

Peter shivered. "What shall we do, David? This is a horrible place, but I don't want to go back to the others yet."

"Neither do I. Let's go right round the house and by then that old bore ought to have finished. What puzzles me about this place is that there are never any people about."

They walked hand in hand out of the shadows into the sunshine of a big courtyard one side of which was obviously stables and the other old coach-houses. There was a big pile of builder's rubble in the centre, but the doors to the kitchen quarters were closed and there was no sign of life. Then

David glanced up and saw a gleam of yellow amongst the thick ivy with which the walls were covered. Whatever it was was nowhere near a window.

"Look, Peter. What's that up there? Looks like a piece of silk or material. Could it have been taken up there by a bird?"

Peter had exceptionally long sight, and as she narrowed her eyes she gripped his fingers with excitement.

"It's a scarf or a silk handkerchief. It's got some markings on it but I can't see what they are... David! *Jenny told me that the scarf she bought for Tom in Shrewsbury was yellow with blue horseshoes on it. I believe that's it. It's a signal. Tom is a prisoner in this house or was brought here at some time.*"

"Fetch Jenny," David ordered. "Get her away from the others - particularly from Amanda Gray - without any fuss. Tell the twins if you must, but ask them, somehow or other, to keep the Panthills busy out there. Nobody must know about this until we're sure."

Peter had gone almost before he had finished speaking. He ran across the yard and, standing against the wall, looked up at the yellow signal. How did it get there? Perhaps the ivy was thick enough to cover an air slit in the stonework, or there might be a small barred window through which the captive had been able to thrust the scarf? David was still baffled by the fact that there was no sign of anybody working in the kitchen quarters, but he was afraid that if he made too much noise someone might hear him. But he realized that he must do all he could to find out whether Tom was within reach, and so again and again he whistled the peewit's lament. There was no answering signal.

Meanwhile Jenny, bored and miserable, was standing in the crowd with Mr. Sterling on one side and the twins on the other. She saw Peter and David slip away together and envied them. She looked round for Ned but could not see him and then dissuaded Mary from going back to the car to see how Mackie was. A few minutes later she noticed Peter return alone and start edging her way into the crowd. Then, when Peter realized that Jenny had seen her, she beckoned to her urgently. Jenny wondered where David was as she too tried to slip away without causing a commotion.

The Colonel was still droning on about the wonderful community life in Onnybrook as one or two people followed Jenny's example. The twins came too and when Jenny glanced towards the speaker she saw Mrs. Panthill staring at her ferociously. Clear of the crowd Peter grabbed her hand, led her behind some trees and told her what she and David had seen. When the twins joined them they were furious when they learned they might have been left behind to the horrors of Colonel Panthills speech, but they listened without interruption as Peter repeated some of her story.

"We're not sure whether Tom is in the house, but we must try to find out how the scarf got stuck in the ivy. David sent you a special message. Jenny must check that the scarf is the one she gave Tom, but you, twins, have to make absolutely certain that neither of the Panthills come back to the house

or go to the courtyard. Keep them in the gardens here. And the same with Amanda. Don't tell her anything. Don't let her guess. Keep her away from the house. And I wouldn't tell Ned either, although I haven't seen him yet. Can you do that? We promise we'll be back with news as soon as we can. Will you do that for Tom, twins?"

"Will do," Dickie said as a tremendous and heartfelt burst of applause signified that at last the Colonel had declared the show well and truly open. Mary, after a quick glance at Jenny, decided not to argue because, apart from any other reason, the duty assigned to them sounded attractive.

Everyone now was crowding into the tents and round the sideshows. The loudspeakers were dispensing pop music and only the twins were watching Colonel and Mrs. Panthill. They saw the latter turn to her husband as soon as the Chairman of the Society had come down the steps to join the crowd. She spoke to him urgently as she struggled up from her chair and pointed in the direction in which Peter and Jenny had disappeared. For a moment the Colonel looked a little disconcerted but then he shrugged his shoulders, took his wife's arm and helped her down the steps. Mrs. Panthill looked very unhappy.

"She's the one who will want to go indoors first," Mary said shrewdly. "She won't be able to walk very far anyway, so p'raps I'd better go with her and help her to pass the time... If Tom really is a prisoner here, you know what that means, don't you, twin?"

Dickie nodded. "Yes, I do. It means Hillpants is a double-dyed traitor, an' a crook, an' a liar, an' a scummy old dirty dog of the first water if you know what I mean. I'll keep him away from Mrs. Hillpants and go round the show with him, but I'm not sure yet what I'll do if he decides to walk round his house to see where the girls went. And where's Amanda? She said she wanted to get inside the house and that's just what she mustn't do now."

"I saw her just now. I don't know whether she noticed Peter and Jenny go but she was talking to Mummy and Mr. Sterling. I don't think we ought to tell them anything yet, but if Amanda tries to get into the house I s'pose we shall have to."

"Let's see what happens," Dickie said. "We can't do everything but we can waste their time and try to keep them away from the house. Better go over to them now. Mrs. Hillpants won't be able to walk much farther so you'd better take charge."

They managed to waste some time but it was more difficult for Dickie than for his sister, because the Colonel was going round the stalls escorted by three members of the committee. This worried Dickie because he could see that the Colonel was getting bored and was not really listening. It seemed to him that he might become so bored that he would suddenly rush into the house in despair or slip away to see where the two girls had gone. Mary, of course, was all smiling innocence when she greeted the perspiring Mrs. Panthill.

"Good afternoon, my lady," she began unexpectedly. "So many people here are so very happy to see you home again. Do you remember me? I'm Mary Morton and I shall never forget how kind you were to me up on the mountain when your lovely, lovely horse ran away and I was so frightened, I told my mother how kind and brave you had been and she said she would so like to meet you. It would be an honour she said, and so of course it is... She's here somewhere and I'm going to fetch her to see you presently... You look so tired and hot, my lady. Why don't you sit down here in the shade and let me go dashing about for you. I'd like to do that. You just sit and people will come and talk to you and I can fetch you tea and ices or anybody you'd like to meet!"

Mrs. Panthill was tempted and sat down after a word with her husband. The Colonel did not look pleased and Dickie heard him say, "Very well, my dear. Rest if you must, but I hope you will be able to see the flower arrangements. Our friends are expecting you to go round."

Mary was sorry for her and could not believe that she could really be as bad as her husband. She sat down beside her and was not surprised when she was asked where her friends had gone. Mary dealt with this question by saying that she had no idea - which was true - but that neither Jenny nor Peter liked flowers, which was untrue. Then Amanda came up and asked the same question, and Mary, hoping she would be forgiven for her lies, answered them both by confessing that she thought they might have gone

home. She made Amanda sit down next to Mrs. Panthill and got them talking together, but she dared not go and buy herself the ice for which she was craving. She wasted some more time by introducing her mother. Mr. Sterling of course had been a member of her rescue party and knew Mrs. Panthill already.

Meanwhile Dickie was also pursuing delaying tactics. He introduced himself to the Colonel and asked his advice on horticultural matters on every possible occasion and was amused to see how it was annoying him. He was certainly getting restless and Dickie was sure he was anxious to get back to the house, so he bought him an ice-cream cornet which enraged him so much that he dropped it on his beautiful grey trousers.

"For heaven's sake go away, boy, and leave me in peace," he barked. "Go away and take your revolting confectionery with you. I must take my wife back to the house now but I shall return later, when I hope she will be well enough to present the prizes."

Dickie nearly panicked. He knew he was not doing very well and had no idea how long David and the girls wanted. He might pretend to be ill and roll in agony on the grass and in a crisis he might run away into the house and try to warn the others.

Then, near the entrance to the vegetable tent, he saw Inspector Cantor talking to Ned Stacey, and he knew what he must do. He apologized about the ice and then saw the detective turn his back and nod to Ned who strolled away towards the tea tent.

Dickie had the sense to wait until the Colonel had moved off too and then he dodged through the crowd to Cantor.

"Quick, sir!" he gasped. "The others have got a clue that Tom is locked up in the house and they're searching for him. I think Mrs. Panthill saw the girls go off and warned the Colonel. He's just said that he must take his wife back to the house now. Please stop them or, better still, go and help David and the girls."

"What clue, Richard?"

Dickie told him.

"Good boy. Stay out here with your sister. Don't tell anybody else and keep away from the house."

* * *

While the twins were doing their best, David, Peter and a wildly excited Jenny were inside Pontesford Hall. When the girls had joined up with him and Jenny had identified the scarf, David had not seen anybody nor had he had an answer to his peewit call.

"We must get into the house at once, David. This is our big chance, because the twins will do their best to keep the Panthills away," Jenny urged. "But hurry, please. I'm sure Tom is here."

There was nobody in the drive - only Colonel Panthill's car. The big front door of the Hall was ajar, so David opened it cautiously and then, when they were over the threshold, he prudently closed it without latching it so that they could get out quickly if necessary. The house was incredibly quiet, and as they stood there with wildly beating hearts a gleam of sunshine from a window above the great staircase lit up a corner of the oak table in the middle of the hall.

"It's dusty," Peter whispered. "And the flowers in the bowl are dead. Perhaps they haven't got any servants? It doesn't look lived in. Where shall we go first?"

David pointed upstairs. "That's where we saw the scarf. Let's risk it."

There were plenty of footprints in the dust on the un-carpeted stairs, and Peter reminded them of the rubble in the yard and that builders might still be working in the house. They paused on the landing under the big window from which they could see the tops of the marquees above the trees. Suddenly Peter's scalp prickled with fear. She clutched David's arm and stood on tiptoe to whisper in his ear, "I'm sure I heard something. A click like a door opening."

They stood like statues staring up the next flight of stairs waiting for another sign that they were not alone in the house, but nothing else happened. Jenny was the first to speak.

"Perhaps it's Tom? Shall we whistle the peewit's call so that he knows it's us?"

David put a hand over her lips.

"No. It may be someone else. We can't go back now so we'd better go on. If we meet anyone we'll say the front door was open and we wanted to see the house... Come on."

They crept, hand in hand, up the stairs. At the top a long corridor stretched away to the right. It was badly lit with only three narrow windows which overlooked the courtyard. None of them was made to open and they were dusty and half covered with ivy.

"Tom's scarf wasn't by a window, I'm sure," Peter whispered. "It was beyond them. Perhaps he's locked in a room at the end of the passage?"

Their feet made no sound on the carpet as they passed several closed doors. David was tempted to see if they were locked, but although he did not intend to tell the girls, he was very frightened. The corridor was long and each step took them farther from the stairs which was their only escape route. He felt trapped and was tortured with a desire to turn round and see who was watching their backs. Once too he imagined that he could smell tobacco.

There was a narrow oak door studded with great nails at the end of the corridor. It was locked, but Jenny, with shaking fingers, pointed to scratches round the keyhole and the gleam of oil on the ironwork. Suddenly she lost her nerve and, pushing past David, she banged her fists on the door and shouted, "Tom! Tom! Are you in there? We saw your scarf and we've come to rescue you. It's me, Tom. Jenny. *Answer me, Tom. Answer me!*"

They heard a muffled cry from inside the room and the crash of a slammed door behind them. David and Peter turned round first and saw a big man

with black, greasy hair dressed in slacks and a checked shirt. His hands were behind his back and although he was at least twenty paces away they could see the whites of his eyes as he glared at them. None of them spoke until Jenny turned round and whispered with horror, "It's the man with three fingers!"

David was not surprised and stepped forward courageously.

"Sorry if we're trespassing," he explained. "The front door was open and we thought the Colonel wouldn't mind if we looked round his marvellous house. We didn't realize that this part was private. Perhaps you could show us the quickest way out? Is there a staircase behind this door?"

The man was pale and unshaven. His lips moved but at first no words came. He brought his hands from behind his back and, fascinated, they watched him swinging a big key from one of the fingers of his maimed hand.

"That's right," he said in a hoarse whisper. "That's the idea. It's a staircase. I'll unlock it, chum, and you can go down that way."

He glared at Jenny and she knew that he had recognized her. Too late she covered her face with her hands as he said, "Now where have I seen that little red-headed bird? Not to worry though. I'll show you the way out. Sort of secret staircase it is. Get out of the way so's I can unlock the door."

They realized now that they were trapped and David was sure that there was no staircase behind the locked door. Tom might be there but there was no sense in joining him as a prisoner. What they had to do was to get him out.

"Don't bother," he said. "We'll go back down the main stairs. That's the way we came up," and he stepped in front of the girls.

For a moment the man stood there like a ferocious gorilla with his shoulders hunched forward and his arms hanging loosely. Then he began to swear at them. Peter cried out as David, in a rage, ran forward to grapple with the man. And at that precise moment three strange men appeared at the top of the stairs.

"That will do, Harry," one of them shouted as they ran along the corridor. "You're just the chap we're looking for. Come along downstairs like a good boy and have a little chat with the Inspector."

The man with three fingers did not make much of a stand. He lashed out once and dropped the key but the three detectives closed round him and hustled him away. One of them called over his shoulder, "See if you can find young Ingles. We'll be back."

Jenny had picked up the key before they were out of sight. She pushed David aside and thrust it into the lock.

"We're here, Tom!" she shouted as she struggled to turn it. "It's all right now, Tom. You're safe."

David put his hand over hers and forced the lock back. Peter pulled the door open and out of the shadows of a little cell-like room Tom Ingles stumbled, blinking, into the light.

"It's you, Jen," he whispered. "Pretty little Jenny. It's been dark in there all the time. It's a sort of chapel. No window. Only a slit for air. There wasn't anything I could do, but we must be careful of Three Fingers."

Jenny stood before him with tears trickling down her face.

"You're safe now, Tom. They've taken Three Fingers away. They've got Dank and we've found you."

He smiled and touched her gently and she put her arms round him and held him close as Peter and David turned and walked away.

* * *

While the detectives were upstairs dealing with Three Fingers, Inspector Cantor himself found Colonel Panthill examining plates of carrots in the vegetable tent and asked for his help.

"If you would be kind enough to return to the house, sir, I should be grateful. We are sure you can help us by answering a few questions. There

are some interesting developments in the matter of Tom Ingles' disappearance. I think we make progress."

"Of course, Inspector. Of course. Come in and have a drink and let me help you if I can. I think the afternoon is going very well."

The twins, now both with Mrs. Panthill, watched the two men strolling towards the house. Mary realized that the older woman was desperately frightened. Her cheeks sagged and her painted lips trembled uncontrollably as she watched her husband who had not even glanced in her direction.

Meanwhile the Inspector stood aside as the Colonel opened his front door. Mr. Cantor glanced over his shoulder at a man in a blue suit who had been following them and nodded at the Colonel's car. Then he followed his host into the hall. They were just in time to see Three Fingers and his three attendants coming down the stairs. He was handcuffed to one of them and when he saw Panthill and his companion he began to curse and swear again.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" the Colonel blustered. "Who is this blackguard? Who are these men? What are they doing in my house?"

Nobody answered. One of the detectives grinned at the Inspector and said, "The three older kids are up there. They're looking for young Ingles now."

That was enough for the gallant Colonel. This was the end of the road for him, but he made one last despairing effort to escape retribution by bolting for his car. He turned and jumped down the steps, staggered and nearly fell, then ran forward and flung open the driver's door of his car. The man in the blue suit was sitting in the passenger's seat.

"Not to worry, sir," he said quietly. "I've got the ignition key in my pocket. I think the Inspector wants you."

Panthill and the man with three fingers were taken away in a police van which had been waiting in the drive, while the Inspector went into the house in time to meet David and Peter and then Tom and Jenny in the hall.

He smiled at the two couples benevolently and then shook hands with Tom.

"Sorry we've been a long time, Tom. Are you all right? Did they hurt you?"

"Not really, sir. I'll tell you all about it when you're ready. Jenny says I'm in Pontesford Hall but I wasn't sure where I was. May I call Ingles, please?"

Cantor nodded towards a telephone in a corner of the hall.

"There it is and take Jenny with you. I'll send you all back in police cars if you like. We're going to search the house now, so it's going to be closed to all outsiders and guarded by my men, but there's no reason to stop the flower show. We'll try not to make any fuss."

The twins then dashed in and flung themselves excitedly on Tom who had handed over the telephone to Jenny. He was so dazed that he could do no more than smile feebly at them and sit down and hold his head in his hands. Mary stood by him and with an oddly tender gesture touched his hair. She did not know yet what had happened to him but she was remembering what her mother had said to them at breakfast this morning. Tom belonged to them all and they had him back again at last.

Peter and David were telling Dickie about the secret room and what had happened upstairs when Cantor joined them.

"I must see this place for myself," he said. "Nobody else is to be allowed in the house, but if Richard and Mary would like to come up with me now to see this hidden chapel before we search the place from top to bottom they are welcome. The police are grateful for their co-operation."

And this was how the twins saw, for the first time, the tiny chapel with a stone altar at one end where a priest, hiding from persecution three hundred years ago, had, from time to time, celebrated mass for those Catholics who lived at Pontesford Hall. And they saw something else too as the Inspector swung the beam of his torch over the stone walls.

They saw above the doorway inside the chapel one stone on which was carved a crude rendering of a hawk.

13. Saturday Night: Camp-fire

This momentous Saturday for the Lone Piners died in glory as the sun went down behind the Welsh mountains. Night came reluctantly and it was nearly ten o'clock when David and Peter climbed up the track from Witchend to the camping place round the solitary pine tree. They were laden with baskets of food and crockery and David had on his back a knapsack filled with small logs and kindling.

When they reached the little clearing they stood for a moment or two in silence looking at the ridge of the Long Mynd which was silhouetted, long and black, against a sky which was now palely green. The first star blazed above the tight ranks of trees in the State Forest, and when they looked down into the little valley they saw the lighted windows of Witchend glowing their usual welcome. In the wood a bird gave a strange cry and far, far away a dog barked.

"Your mother is marvellous, David," Peter said. "It's a grand idea of hers for us to finish this awful week up here. Everything for us - for all of us - started round this old tree... Light the fire now. The others will be here soon. Do you really think our detective Cantor will come? I like him. He didn't treat us as if we were a lot of silly children and he has been very, very kind to Tom and Jenny... Poor Tom. I wonder if he'll ever tell us everything that happened?"

"I don't suppose so," David replied as he put a match to the little pyramid of twigs he had been building. "He doesn't talk much about himself any time, does he? Is that crazy woman Amanda Gray coming? I never quite trusted her and I'm not sure that I do now. And what about Ned?"

"Your mother asked them both, but everything was so confusing and exciting when the word got round about Tom that I'm not sure whether they agreed. Amanda was furious because the police wouldn't let her into the house, but I bet she won't be able to keep away to-night. We can see everybody arriving from here, so stoke up the fire and make it like a beacon... Here comes your mother with the twins. She's the only person in

the world who could have persuaded them to go on their beds for a couple of hours. I bet they'll be in fine form."

It was dark now but for the stars and a radiance in the southern sky where the moon was waiting. The sparks from the camp-fire flew upwards and died before they reached the branches of the sentinel pine. Macbeth, with a bark of welcome, charged into the clearing with the twins close behind him. Dickie was carrying a square parcel wrapped in brown paper about which he was secretive when David asked him what it was.

"Private. Jus' private, brother. A private surprise if you really want to know."

"That's right," Mary agreed. "The mystery of our parcel and its grim secret will be disclosed just when we think fit, brother. Not to worry though. Hide it behind the tree, twin, and let us gloat over the surprise they're going to have presently... Where's my favourite man? I mean your father, Peter. He really is first favourite with me after our father. And Uncle Alf Ingles stands high and now of course he's got some competition with our splendid detective... Where are all these men?"

"They're at Ingles," Peter explained, "but there's somebody coming now. I can see the flash of a torch. Tom and Jenny, I think."

Tom and Jenny it was, and a few minutes later the Ingles Land Rover drove into the Witchend yard with the farmer and his wife, Mr. Sterling, and, rather surprisingly, Amanda Gray and Ned Stacey.

Mr. Ingles had brought rugs and his wife had provided flasks of hot cocoa for those who wanted it. Potatoes in their jackets were already roasting in the embers of the fire.

"Sit down, all," Mr. Ingles roared in his old form. "Round the camp-fire. That's the idea... Inspector telephoned just now and is on his way. Looks like his headlights now. He said he'd be driving himself. Somebody should have stayed down below for he'll never find the track up here by himself in the dark."

"I'll go," Jenny volunteered and of course Tom went with her.

The Inspector was breathless when he arrived but obviously in a very good humour. After greeting Mrs. Morton and Mr. Ingles he sat down next to Mary and accepted a mug of cocoa.

"Thank you for asking me to your party," he said. "We've all had a long day and Tom in particular has had a tough week. You youngsters have behaved very well in the way you've helped the police. It's strange, Mrs. Morton, that it's not the first time they've done this, and I'm wondering whether we won't make a policeman out of your Richard one of these days. I'm going to ask Tom to tell his story again and then I'll answer any questions. Before Tom starts, I want to say how pleased I am to see Ned Stacey, and you should all know that he was right in his belief that he had been framed by Dank. He had, but Dank was only one of many such stooges working on commission for the man who called himself Panthill and who was probably never a colonel. Ned led us to Dank, and Dank, with plenty of luck for us, led us to Panthill for whom the country's police have been searching all this week. Actually Dank betrayed Panthill to us, but let Tom speak now. Meanwhile, don't let's forget Ned who had such a cruel trick played on him and who behaved with great courage. I'm sorry that we seemed suspicious of you at one time, Ned. I never thought you were guilty of conspiracy, but Dank was very plausible and you shouldn't have persuaded Tom to come with you."

"Lucky I did, sir," came Ned's voice from the shadows. "I'd have been in a bad way without him. I didn't like the way you asked me questions, though. I was sure you thought I was a liar. Anyway, thanks for what you've just said, and to Tom too for going after that so-and-so with three fingers and remembering that he was the bloke who started on me... Thank you, sir."

It was difficult to make Tom talk. He would have preferred to answer a few questions and then concentrate on Jenny for the rest of the evening. Finally his uncle persuaded him.

"Come along, Tom lad. If words don't come easy we'll understand. Tell us this once so we can all get the story clear and we'll never bother you again.

It's best to get it off your chest. You know how we've all been worrying about you."

Tom and Jenny were standing against the tree and only when the flames of the fire leapt up was there enough light for any of them to see their faces. His arm was round her shoulders as he began to talk.

"There isn't anything I haven't told the Inspector but it was Jenny who was smart enough in Bert's cafe to see that I was talking about the very chap who was sitting behind me. We were never sure whether he heard what I was saying but I believe he did because, whether he knew that I was trying to follow him or not, he went off to Dank to tell him that the two of us had recognized him. Of course I made a fool of myself in Dank's office, and I know I wasn't much trouble to the two of them when they knocked me silly again. I don't remember how they got me into that cellar. I dunno how long I was flat out. My head hurt, my tongue was too big for my mouth and I was so thirsty I could have drunk Mr. Sterling's reservoir. Dank came in and gave me some tea. I was a fool to drink it because it had something in it and that sent me flat out again. I woke up inside a van that was cruising along pretty smartly but I didn't know where. I wasn't tied up and that was because the drug in my tea did something to my legs and arms; they wouldn't move properly. I rolled about a bit and saw that Dank was the driver. He cursed me but although I couldn't get up, I tried to make my fingers work by rubbing my name in the muck on the side of the van and it was lucky I did."

"So it was," Cantor agreed. "They moved you into another car, didn't they? Do you know where that was?"

Tom shook his head. "No, sir. It was dark under some trees, but I know now that the driver of the other car was Panthill. I never saw him properly but one of them held a torch while the other tied my wrists and then blindfolded me. I got a glimpse of Panthill once, but he'd got a stocking over his face like Three Fingers who must have been already at the Hall when we turned up. He brought me some food after they'd chucked me in that little chapel. I never saw Panthill; I couldn't escape: and whenever anybody came it was Three Fingers. He seemed scared himself sometimes. There wasn't anything to do. There was no window except that slit in the wall for air. I could just

get my arm through, so this morning when there was all that row from the loudspeakers I pushed Jenny's scarf into the ivy as a signal. I remembered the flower show then and guessed I was in the Hall. There's a lot of things I can't remember properly though, but I reckoned they were keeping me locked up because we'd spotted Three Fingers... That's about all, sir, except thanks very much for helping Jenny and the others to get me out. Maybe you could tell us the truth now about this man Panthill."

The Inspector got up and joined Tom and Jenny.

"Yes, I will, if you all promise not to discuss these matters with anybody else. I must go back in a few minutes, but I felt the police owed you an unofficial explanation. Every single one of you here is involved in one way or another, but you must remember that neither Panthill nor the other man have yet been brought before a court of law.

"For several months now we've suspected that the raiding and robbing of lorries on the road - particularly at night - was a highly organized affair. Only about a week ago we decided that the work of these modern highwaymen was almost certainly planned very skilfully by one man who may not have been known personally to those he employed. We are sure now that Panthill is our man. I'm sorry for his wife who probably did not know the full extent of his villainy, and she told us enough this afternoon for us to find a secret room on the top floor which he was turning into a nerve-centre for his hijacking schemes. It seems that he has contacts like Dank in all parts of the country. We shall find out who is building his control room and installing his shortwave radio. There is a cabinet of large-scale road maps up there and a safe which will no doubt give us all the evidence we need about those who were working for him. We know of course that the building job must be handled by somebody in his pay. He could never employ local labour and I think this was his biggest blunder."

"That's true," David said. "The first day we went to look at the grounds we were nearly knocked down by a fool driving a van... I'm puzzled about two other things, Inspector. How could he get people like Dank to work for him without them knowing who he was? And what put you on to him this afternoon?"

Cantor knocked out his pipe and moved over to the fire again.

"No doubt he's a blackmailer and has been a criminal for years. He would employ people who have made one or two mistakes in the past by threatening to give evidence of a previous crime to the police. This is an old trick. We shall probably find that Dank has a criminal record. All over the country, in different road transport concerns, he was trying to appoint 'agents' who would follow his instructions which would come to them sometimes by telephone, sometimes by post - eventually I think by short-wave radio like that in the Swift and Sure. I hope that answers your first question, David. The second is easier. Dank was very shaken after his accident and I think he'd had enough. Anyway he was ready to talk. He claims that he never actually met Panthill, but after reporting the capture of Tom to him on the special radio telephone he was instructed to drug him and then bring him to a lonely lane under the Long Mynd at a time which made it obvious that the man who met him could not possibly live very far away. Dank said that this man was small and wearing a nylon-stocking mask, but that he was certain the voice was the same as that of the man who telephoned his instructions. He spoke with the same authority. Dank was certain of this, but although he did not see the number of Panthill's car he knew it was a Mini. We've found such a car locked up in the stables of Pontesford Hall, and it's obvious that somebody posing as a sort of country squire would have a second car and Minis are common enough not to attract much notice. But you can't remember much about that last journey, can you, Tom?"

"No, sir. When they hauled me out of the van that drug got at me again, and I don't really remember anything more than a chap with a torch and somebody tying my wrists and blindfolding me. I told you about that just now... I wonder where Dank got that van and who was employing Three Fingers?"

"No secret about the van which was sometimes kept at the Swift and Sure place. Three Fingers the bandit was no doubt on Panthill's pay-roll too but had probably contacted Dank before the actual raid. We found his motorbike at the Hall too, so he was probably told to go to another meeting place but Three Fingers hasn't told us much yet. He will."

"I suppose Panthill wanted to hide him," Tom said. "I don't like that chap. You still haven't told us what made you concentrate on Panthill this afternoon."

"We've been curious about him for a few days. He was so anxious to please. So anxious to be the country gentleman and so touchy about anybody going into his house, as Mrs. Gray knows. There were also the mysterious building operations, and although the Panthills certainly did attend a dinner party on the night of the raid, it seemed rather a coincidence that he was first on the scene even if he did take the lads to hospital... Now I must go. Thank you all for your help. We shall have to take official statements from some of you later but there's no reason why all you young people shouldn't enjoy your holiday now... I'm sure we shall all meet again."

Mr. Ingles with a torch led him down to his car and when they were halfway down the hill Tom caught them up. He did not say much but he opened the door of the police car for the Inspector.

"Take care of yourself, Tom," the latter said as he shook hands. "Nothing else you want to tell me, is there?"

"No, sir. Just wanted to see you safely off the premises. Goodnight!"

Together, uncle and nephew watched the Inspector's car turn into the lane and then the farmer said gruffly, "Everything O.K., Tom? There isn't anything else, is there?"

"Not to do with the police there isn't. Just wanted to say something to you though. Two things really. Let's go back to the others and I'll tell you on the way."

Somebody up in the camp must have just thrown some more wood on the embers of the fire for suddenly a flurry of flame shot up so that for a few seconds they could see the branches of the solitary pine tree and the silhouetted figures of the twins who seemed to be dancing round the fire.

Tom walked behind his uncle up the narrow track again and it was not, after all, so difficult to say what he wanted.

"I was thinking a lot, Uncle Alf, when I was locked up in that place. First of all I want to say I'm downright sorry for upsetting you and Aunt Betty on Monday night when I went off with Ned. I reckon you know why I did. It's just that I've got to do some things on my own sometimes. Things away from the farm and with other chaps."

"That's enough of that, Tom," his uncle said gruffly. "We been talking it over too this week and we reckon you're right when you want to get away sometimes. That's going to change, I promise you... And if you've had enough of farming, Tom, maybe we can do something to help get you started somewhere else although I'm not that keen on lorry driving. You can do better than that. Maybe the days of small farms like Ingles are nearly over but if you and young Jenny wanted it one day - well, we'd like it to come to you when you were ready for it, to keep the name right, if you see what I mean. You'll have to think it over, but if you're so inclined I reckon you ought to go off for a year or two on a bigger farm and that can be arranged easy enough. We'll talk about it again."

Tom stopped in his tracks.

"You know, Uncle, sometimes just when everything seems to be going wrong, and you can't make sense of what's happening, a chap like me gets hit on the head and then everything starts being wonderful. What you've said just now is the second marvellous thing that's happened this week. I want to be a farmer, Uncle Alf. I want to farm Ingles and if I make half as good a job of it as you've done I'll be a good farmer. Saying thank you doesn't mean much. I'm going to show you."

For a moment or two Alf Ingles could not trust his voice. Then, "That's fine, Tom. That's grand. Your aunt will be glad too. What's the other thing, Tom?"

"Jenny," Tom said happily. "Little Jenny redhead. She's my girl for always and I've told her so."

"And about time too. We've been wondering when you'd see sense. Not a word to the others now about what we've been saying. We've plenty of time

for making plans... It's good to have you back here, Tom. Seem to belong to the place now."

They walked to the camp-fire in companionable silence, hearing Amanda Gray's voice above some of the others. As they came into the circle of firelight, Jenny stepped forward to look enquiringly at Tom. He smiled at her and then to everybody's surprise Alf Ingles stooped and kissed her. Mary broke a surprised silence when she laughed and said, "Lucky little Jenny. He's my favourite uncle, too. We've been waiting for you two 'cos Amanda is still very worried about the Pontesford treasure and 'Cup Under Hawk'. The police won't let her into the house to look for it and she's browned off, aren't you, Amanda?"

Amanda was now standing defiantly against the tree, knowing that she had never really won their confidence.

"I was saying that I know I'm only a stranger, but how glad I am that Tom is back home again and that everything is going to be all right with Ned. I do still want to know whether there is a Pontesford treasure, and I was just telling Ned that if the clue in the bible his mother sold me helps us to find it then she will get a share if I get anything. I promised her that. Will some of you come with me tomorrow and ask the Inspector if we may look for a cup under a hawk? I don't suppose you had a chance to look for such a thing, did you, Tom?"

Tom looked at her in amazement. How silly could the woman be!

"Sorry," he smiled. "I hadn't the time."

If any of them had been watching the twins during Amanda's last words they would have noticed their almost uncontrollable excitement.

Suddenly Dickie could bear it no longer and shouted:

"Make the fire blaze up again, David. Give us some light. We've found the Pontesford treasure. We found it ourselves. We've got it in a parcel. It's real. It's a golden cup covered with jewels... Fetch it, Mary. It's behind the tree.

We've done it again for you... You all talk an' talk, an' fuss an' fuss... Now look. You open it, twin... Just show them."

Mary, with shaking fingers, tore away the paper from the parcel. The flames of the Lone Pine camp-fire flared up again and glinted on the precious stones set in the stem and round the base of the beautiful treasure which had probably been hidden from Cromwell's Roundheads three hundred years ago.

They crowded round Mary who held it high, as many a priest had done in the past before the altar on which he had celebrated the Holy Sacrifice.

"Let me hold it, my dear," Mr. Sterling whispered. "Tell us how and when you found it."

Their story was straightforward. When the Inspector was showing them the secret chapel and Dickie had seen the stone in the wall marked with the hawk, they had told him about the clue in Amanda's bible. Before the police made a complete examination of the priest's hiding place Cantor had allowed one of his men to see if the stone could be moved. With very little trouble it was lifted out and the treasure was found.

"And our Mr. Cantor was as excited as we were and said we could borrow it, but to tell Mummy and show it to Mr. Sterling who had better take care of it and talk about who it really belongs to tomorrow," Dickie explained, and then turned to Mr. Sterling. "Is it very rare?"

"I think it is gold. The jewels surely are emeralds and rubies? There are words engraved on it which I cannot read now. Sacred words, no doubt. Its value must be greater than money... See, my dear. This is the treasure in which your husband believed."

Amanda took it, and they saw in the flickering firelight that her face was wet with tears and her lips moving as she whispered words that none of them really wanted to hear.

"It's not the end of your story," Mrs. Morton said as she slipped her arm through that of the younger woman. "We all hope it's the beginning of a

new one for you. Come down to the house now and we'll look at the treasure in a better light and then it's time for homes and beds... Goodness knows who this lovely thing belongs to, but if a share of it doesn't come to you I daresay something else will... Come along."

The grown-ups went first.

Then Peter noticed Ned still standing in the shadows. He had been unusually silent while the treasure was being shown, and as he bent his head to light another cigarette she realized how lonely he must be.

"Hello, Ned," she said as she went over to him. "We're glad you came. There's something we wanted to ask you."

"Not about this rotten business I hope. I've had enough of it for one week. There's too many liars about for my liking. What do you want?"

"Can you swim? Do you like it?"

"Matter of fact I can and I do."

"Good. Come up to Hatchholt tomorrow and swim in the reservoir. We all do most days... David! Ned's coming swimming with us," and almost before he knew what was happening Ned found himself walking down the hill between them.

The twins went next with the faithful Macbeth at their heels and so Jenny and Tom were left alone.

"Why did you rush after your uncle and the Inspector, Tom? You just left me standing there looking silly."

"You couldn't do that. You are sometimes a silly little redhead but you don't look it. Aren't you lucky?"

"I want to know, Tom."

"Something important I had to say to Uncle Alf. Private it was. He had something to tell me, too." She knew he was teasing her so she came close

to him and rested her cheek on the rough tweed of his shoulder,

"Tell me, Tom."

"I s'pose you've got to know," he said as he raised her chin and smiled down at her. "Just listen carefully because this is going to be one big surprise to you. If you're a good girl and go on growing up nicely like you're doing now you're going to be a farmer's wife - and one day maybe you'll be the wife of the farmer of Ingles, Onnybrook, in the county of Shropshire... Come along, Jenny sweet. Never forget that you're my girl."

"I won't, Tom," she whispered as he kissed her. "Never, never, never."

Hand in hand they followed the others down to the welcoming lights of the little house they all loved, while the old owl of Witchend drifted silently over the branches of the solitary pine tree.